

# THE 3 INVESTIGATORS in

## THE MYSTERY OF THE MOVIE SCRIPT PLOY





in

**THE MYSTERY  
OF THE  
MOVIE SCRIPT PLOY**

A student seeks the help of The Three Investigators to locate his best friend who has mysteriously gone missing. The case comes with a host of bizarre clues, including indications that the friend is on the Indonesian island of Sumatra, and is being stalked in the jungle there. In the midst of the case, Pete receives an unrelated but urgent request, and he goes off to retrieve a document from a movie studio. Jupiter and Bob are left to handle the first case, which seems to go nowhere; while Pete, in the second case, finds himself in deep trouble.

The Three Investigators  
in  
The Mystery of the Movie Script Ploy

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## 1. A Student Goes Missing

“It’s really amazing what strange equipment your uncle keeps dragging in,” Bob Andrews commented. “Until recently, I didn’t even know there was such a thing as a trencher.”

Together with his friends Jupiter Jones and Pete Crenshaw, Bob was working on a defective construction machine for laying cables and pipes. The three of them were at The Jones Salvage Yard, a successful business operated by Jupiter’s uncle Titus and aunt Mathilda in Rocky Beach.

Jupiter grinned broadly. “They don’t just sell things here, they also fill gaps in our knowledge... By the way, Pete, could you install back the sprocket now?”

Pete indicated a bow. “Consider it done, Your Lordship.”

“Sheesh...” Bob rolled his eyes. “Your frequent citing of catch phrases from those ‘Winter World’ movies are starting to get on my nerves.”

“It’s *Winter Worlds*,” Pete corrected, “and if you find such catch phrases annoying, then I suppose that also applies to classics like ‘E.T. phone home’ and ‘May the Force be with you’...”

“Look, fellas,” Jupe interrupted his friends. “If we don’t get this trencher fixed up by tomorrow, Her Ladyship would banish us to the outer limits of the final frontier.”

At that moment, a visibly excited dark-blond man in his mid-twenties entered the premises. With a somewhat awkward-looking gesture, he raised his hand in greeting from afar. “Hi, you’re The Three Investigators, right?”

“That’s right,” Jupiter confirmed as he put a spanner down on the workbench. Together with Bob and Pete, he went to meet the visitor. “I’m Jupiter Jones, and these are my colleagues, Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews.”

“Uh, yeah...” the visitor mumbled.

“So how may we address you?” Jupe asked.

“Oh, sorry... My name is Vincent—Vincent Barraford.” The young man was sweating profusely, which didn’t seem to be solely due to the temperature. He also stepped nervously from one foot to the other.

“He seems to be struggling with himself,” Pete whispered to Bob.

“So... how can we help you?” Jupe enquired politely.

The man fiddled uncertainly with the collar of his shirt. “The matter... is not easy to explain.” Vincent took a deep breath. “To be honest, I don’t know how to—” He faltered again.

Jupiter sensed that tact was required with this visitor. A little relaxation couldn’t hurt. With a friendly smile, he pointed to the verandah of the yard office. “How about a little refreshment? We have lemonade, mineral water, cola and orange juice.”

“Well, I’ll have a lemonade!” Pete announced, beaming. “My throat is already dry.”

Vincent’s tension did indeed seem to ease a little. He nodded. “A lemonade would be great.”

“Well, then...” The First Investigator made an inviting gesture with his hand.

Two minutes later, the four of them had made themselves comfortable on camping chairs and were enjoying Aunt Mathilda’s homemade lemonade with ice cubes.

After taking a big gulp, Vincent let out a sigh of relief. "This is really good... I don't think I've had anything to drink today because of all the confusion."

"Is it about the matter that brought you here?" Jupiter picked up the thread.

"Yes..." Vincent's features hardened.

Pete leaned forward tensely. "You said it wasn't easy to explain. What exactly happened?"

The young man tightened up. Then he dropped the bombshell: "My housemate Jayden Cummings has been missing since yesterday."

"Missing?" Bob's eyes widened.

Vincent wiped his sweaty forehead furiously. "Well, he's gone—just gone. I don't know when exactly, but he wasn't there when I got up yesterday morning... so he could have disappeared on Thursday night. None of our friends know anything."

"Do you always see each other in the morning?" Jupiter asked.

"Yes, we usually have breakfast together before going to college. We're both studying economics at Santa Monica College." Vincent put his glass down on the table. "—But yesterday he didn't come to any of the classes we're attending. The first one was at 10 am, the other two at 12 noon and 2 pm. Of course, I tried to reach him on his mobile phone during the breaks between classes, but he didn't answer. When I got back home in the late afternoon, Jayden still wasn't there—no message, no clues, nothing at all... and he didn't come home today either."

"Has something like this happened before?" asked Pete.

Vincent shook his head. "Never. Jayden wouldn't just disappear without telling me. No way. We've known each other since we were kids and we've never kept secrets from each other."

"When was the last time you saw him?" Bob asked.

"On Thursday evening... We watched a movie. After that I went to bed around eleven."

"I see." Jupiter frowned. "What about Jayden's family? Have you informed them yet?"

"That wasn't possible," the student replied, embarrassed. "Jayden only has his father left and he's on holiday, but I don't know where. I don't know his mobile phone number. Moreover, he doesn't have any siblings, so I didn't have anyone to turn to."

"That's why you came to us," Bob concluded.

Vincent nodded. "I've read about the successes of the three of you and I was very impressed by your phenomenal sleuthing skills."

"Very flattering," Jupiter remarked, "but if it's been over twenty-four hours since your friend disappeared, you'd better file a missing persons report with the police."

The answer that followed was almost unbelievable: "No. He doesn't want that."

"He doesn't... want that?" Pete remarked, perplexed. "How can you know that if Jayden has gone missing?"

"—Because he's already called me twice."

Now the confusion was complete.

"He... called you?" Bob lifted his shoulders. "When?"

"The first time was early this morning at 4 am, and the second time was at 7 am."

Pete looked at the visitor blankly. "—But then you could have just asked him what was going on!"

"I couldn't," Vincent replied emphatically. "He was just babbling nonsense. Right at the beginning, he claimed he was in Sumatra."

The First Investigator tilted his head in confusion. "In Sumatra? The huge island in Indonesia?"



"I know—it sounds completely crazy, and it can't be possible. Jayden's father keeps him on a pretty tight financial leash. He could never afford a flight like that halfway round the world. Besides, he wouldn't have the slightest reason to travel there in the middle of the semester."

"—Unless he's been abducted," Pete murmured.

Jupiter rubbed the bridge of his nose broodingly. "Very mysterious. What did he say?"

"Wait a minute..." The student took out a lined piece of paper. "It's not the exact wording, of course, because I only wrote it down from memory afterwards. The first time he said something like: 'No police! I mustn't make the sun suspicious. Everyone is waiting for the big moment, especially the men without faces. I want to get out of here, but they won't let me. The jungle is staring at me. Those huge eyes are everywhere.'"

Pete thought he couldn't believe his ears. "What in the world was that about?"

"The second time, I immediately asked him where he was, and because I wasn't quite so surprised this time, I recorded his answer with an app."

Vincent took out his mobile phone and called up an audio file. It featured the rushed-sounding voice of a young man who was obviously confused and frightened at the same time:

*"Sumatra. I am in Sumatra... Everything has been prepared by now. There are no more straight angles. The sky has tilted and the trees have stopped whispering. The rings are very close now. Soon it will be time. My goodness, it will soon be time!"*

"Wow..." Bob murmured quietly.

"Very puzzling..." The First Investigator leaned back in his chair. "Could you show us a photo of Jayden?"

"Yes, of course." The student called up a file again and then passed the mobile phone around. Jayden Cummings was a pleasant-looking, lanky young man with a brown mop of hair and a three-day beard.

Pete handed the mobile phone back to Vincent. "Has Jayden ever travelled to any distant countries before?"

"Never. As I said, he doesn't have the financial means. The longest trip was a camping excursion through Oregon last summer."

"I don't suppose he has any friends or acquaintances from South East Asia?" Bob enquired.

"No, I would have known that," the student replied. "I just can't understand all this."

"Your friend's messages are really very strange." Jupiter paused for a moment. "Please don't take this the wrong way, but is it possible that alcohol or something similar is involved?"

Vincent shook his head vehemently. "Jayden doesn't drink or take drugs... and as you've noticed, he didn't slur his words or speak in any other unnatural way... except for the fear in his voice, which was clearly audible."

"The only question is what caused this fear," Bob replied.

Pete looked over the high wooden fence into the deep blue sky with a tense expression on his face. "The rings are very close now..."

## 2. More About Jayden

Deep in thought, Jupiter scratched his temple.

“Despite the bizarre statements, it seems to me that Jayden is not directly threatened, but rather completely confused... for whatever reason.” He turned to their visitor. “I ask for your understanding that at this early stage we are not yet able to judge whether we are really the right people to handle this case. We need more information first.”

“Of course,” Vincent replied, nodding. “What do you want to know?”

Over the next few minutes, The Three Investigators questioned the student at length about his friend and his background.

At the same time, Bob used his mobile phone to inconspicuously carry out a brief Internet check on Jayden Cummings and Vincent Barraford. However, he found nothing unusual. There were only various posts on student forums and other social media, some college and recreational photos, a few food snapshots and funny animal videos—all completely normal. In addition, there were no reference to Indonesia or any travel plans. He then checked flight connections between California and Sumatra.

“So as far as you know, Jayden’s not in trouble at college,” Jupiter summarized. “He’s also been single for a while and doesn’t want to get involved in a new relationship at the moment.”

“That’s right,” Vincent confirmed. “Jayden wants to concentrate fully on his studies without any distractions. He is reliability personified and extremely ambitious. In two years at college, he has never missed a single class. That’s why my alarm bells immediately rang yesterday.”

“I can understand that,” Pete replied. “When someone suddenly changes behaviour after all this time, it’s really strange.”

“The all-important question is who or what is behind this astonishing change in behaviour...” Jupiter paused briefly and then turned back to Vincent. “You said Jayden had no enemies, and you don’t know anything about any conflicts either.”

“Exactly,” the student agreed. “Jayden is the typical nice guy next door. Anyone who knows him likes him. I’ve never seen him get into trouble with anyone—apart from little squabbles between friends.”

“Like what?” Bob asked.

Vincent smiled wryly. “Jayden is a huge fan of the Cleveland Guardians baseball team. In fact, he is downright fanatical about them, so it’s great to tease him after a defeat. He always explodes and gets back at his friends with nasty remarks when their favourite teams lose.”

“Pretty normal,” replied the Second Investigator. “In any case, there is no reason to abduct anyone—to any place, not just Sumatra.”

“I agree,” Jupiter stated.

Bob turned to Vincent again. “Are you sure he doesn’t have any connections or interests in Indonesia?”

“Pretty much, yes. Anyway, he never mentioned anything about it.”

“—Which would make it all the more puzzling if your friend is actually in Sumatra,” Jupiter added. “That hasn’t been proven, of course. The two calls could have been made from anywhere, including even Santa Monica.”

“Speaking of calls,” Pete chimed in, “were you able to see if Jayden called you on his own mobile phone?”

“Yes, his number was shown on the display.”

Bob tapped on the screen of his mobile phone. “If Jayden started his journey on Thursday night, it’s at least possible that he phoned from Sumatra at 4 am this morning. In any case, there are connecting flights between Los Angeles International Airport and Kualanamu Airport in Medan, the capital of the Indonesian province of North Sumatra. The flight time with stopovers can be a whopping 25 to 27 hours.”

“Well, I just can’t imagine that,” Pete commented, shaking his head. “It’s crazy... especially as Jayden was talking about being in Sumatra, followed by a load of gibberish. It’s much more likely that someone gave him something unnoticed or against his will. That’s what knocked him out mentally, so that he fantasizes about the ‘tilting sky’ and ‘whispering trees’.”

Vincent made a helpless gesture. “—But who would have done that? And for what purpose?”

“These are key questions we have to address,” the First Investigator said. “What I can say is that there seems to be some kind of substance involved that severely impairs your friend’s perception.” He tapped his chin thoughtfully. “To get a clearer picture, I suggest we carry out a thorough examination of Jayden’s room. Hopefully we’ll find a clue there.”

“Sounds good,” Pete agreed. Bob also nodded.

For the first time, a smile flitted across Vincent’s face. “Thank you very, very much. If anyone can help me at all, it’s you.”

“We’ll do our best as always,” Jupiter replied, “but first...” He reached into his trouser pocket and handed the student the business card of The Three Investigators:



Vincent’s smile widened as he read the card. “Thank you very much again.”

Then he looked over to the gate. “Do you have a car? I’m here on my motorbike and could only give one of you a lift.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll take my Beetle,” Bob replied.

Jupiter nodded to the student. “Perhaps you set off first as I have to convince my aunt that we need to go on an urgent field mission.”

“Then the trencher will have to wait,” Pete whispered with a grin.

After Vincent had given his address in Santa Monica and they had exchanged mobile phone numbers, he left the salvage yard. For the time being, The Three Investigators remained on the verandah.

Lost in thought, Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “Given this bizarre scenario, I’m sure we all agree that the whole thing could be a bad joke.”

“—To make fools of ourselves for taking the bait on such rubbish?” asked Bob.

“At least that’s not impossible. We’ve had to deal with the strangest people before. Of course, I couldn’t bring it up in Vincent’s presence...” Jupe furrowed his brow. “—Although I have to admit that his concern seemed very believable to me.”

“I feel the same way,” Pete agreed. “The disappearance of his friend really seems to have taken its toll on him.”

“—If Jayden has indeed disappeared,” Bob added. Then he scratched his ear thoughtfully. “However, I can think of another possibility.”

“Namely?” Jupiter listened intently.

“Maybe Vincent wasn’t faking his concern, but the whole thing is still a bad joke.”

“Huh?” Pete blinked in confusion.

“I guess what you’re getting at.” The First Investigator smiled approvingly. “Maybe the Sumatra story is a ploy aimed exclusively at Vincent. If this is the case, our involvement wouldn’t be part of the ploy at all.”

Bob nodded. “Exactly. It’s possible that Jayden wants to get back at his friend for some reason—may it be cockiness, malice, or revenge. After all, we can’t judge whether he’s really such a friendly likeable guy as Vincent described him.”

Pete snorted grimly. “That would be quite a mess. After an act like that, their friendship could be over.”

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “Some people just have a very peculiar sense of humour.”

“Whatever it is, our task should be to expose this ploy,” Bob said.

The First Investigator then took a last sip of lemonade and stood up. “Yes, it’s high time to shed some light on the fog of speculation!”

### 3. Convincing Her Ladyship

“No. I don’t think that’s okay.” The steep crease of annoyance on Aunt Mathilda’s forehead made it unmistakably clear that she was not at all in agreement with her nephew’s plans to skive off somewhere.

“We’ve already got a buyer for the trencher and you promised to get it fixed today! Titus can’t do it because he’s busy in Pasadena all day.” Jupiter’s aunt pressed her lips together in annoyance. She was in the process of sorting through various painted ceramic cartoon figures at the yard office.

“I told you it was an emergency,” the First Investigator replied sourly.

“So, an emergency—yet again!” Aunt Mathilda gripped a Snoopy figure so tightly with her right hand that Jupiter feared the white beagle might shatter at any moment. “So it’s about a new investigation adventure... and of course that’s much more important than working for one of our regular customers—mind you—one of our oldest and most loyal regular customers.” She made an inviting gesture with her hand. “Well, tell me—I’m all ears.”

This was exactly what Jupiter had feared. What was he supposed to tell his aunt without lying to her and at the same time saving his chances of travelling to Santa Monica? He tried to remain as vague as possible.

“As I’ve already mentioned, I can’t give you any more detailed information at the moment. First Pete, Bob and I need to take a close look at the situation on site.”

“—But that’s not enough for me,” Mathilda Jones replied adamantly. “You’re telling me that you have to leave without a good reason!”

“No... of course not.” Jupiter wrung his hands. The conversation was turning into a real nightmare.

“It just doesn’t work like that, Jupiter Jones. You know very well that in our salvage yard everything works in tandem—like cogs in a well-oiled machine. If every cogwheel decided for itself whether it wanted to turn with the others or not, the result would inevitably be chaos and standstill. Then we might as well close this business.” Now Aunt Mathilda had really got into a rage. “There are duties and there is freedom—and today you’ve taken on a duty. I simply can’t accept that you and your friends would drop everything because of something else.”

Jupiter swallowed. The most unpleasant thing about the whole situation was that he could absolutely understand every word his aunt said. In her position, he would probably have argued in exactly the same way. He had no choice but to put all his eggs in one basket.

“Please trust me. My instinct has rarely been wrong, and this instinct tells me that someone urgently needs our help.” He looked deep into her eyes. “—And right now.”

Jupiter actually thought he recognized an emotion in his aunt’s petrified expression.

“Hmm...”

“I also promise you that we’ll be back here as soon as possible to finish the repair works,” Jupiter added stoutly. “If necessary, I’ll work through the night—it’s the weekend.”

Mathilda Jones let out a very long sigh. Then she pointed to the kitchen door. “Get going now... before I change my mind.”

Relieved, the First Investigator jumped up. “Thank you, Aunt Mathilda! You’re the best!”

The journey to Santa Monica, which The Three Investigators travelled via the Pacific Coast Highway and Olympic Boulevard, took them just under 25 minutes. The sun was now almost at its zenith, gradually raising the temperature in Bob’s Beetle to Saharan levels. Groaning softly, Jupiter waved the latest issue of *Rocky Beach Today* to himself.

“I wish I’d taken some of that lemonade with me,” grumbled Pete, sliding back and forth on the hot leatherette back seat.

“It would probably have evaporated completely by now,” Jupiter groaned, glancing impatiently through the windscreen.

Just like the neighbouring cities of Malibu, Pacific Palisades, Brentwood and Venice, Santa Monica was also part of the Los Angeles metropolitan area. Although the city was considered popular and well-kept, the neighbourhood into which the boys were now turning made a rather forbidding impression. Most of the buildings seemed to be long past their prime and some of the dried-up gardens were very overgrown with warm-season weeds.

The apartment block of Vincent Barraford and Jayden Cummings was no exception. The façade of the unadorned two-storey building was cracked in a few places, and the grass in front was completely withered. It had probably not seen a drop of water for half an eternity.

“This is anything but chic,” Bob commented as he looked for a suitable parking space.

“As a student, you have to be frugal,” Jupiter replied, pointing to a rather scruffy motorcycle parked under a crooked canopy. “That’s probably Vincent’s vehicle.”

“He’s standing over there making a phone call,” Pete pointed out.

Just as Bob was reversing into a parking space next to a rusty Ford Edsel, Vincent saw them and frantically waved at them while pocketing his mobile phone.

“Wait a minute...” Jupiter leaned forward and narrowed his eyes. “Vincent’s making a face like he’s just seen a ghost.”

True enough, the student who was now staggering towards them, was as pale as a sheet. The boys quickly got out of the car.

“Has something happened?” Bob asked when their client had reached them.

Vincent pointed up to the first floor of the building with a trembling hand. “Upstairs—at my door...”

“What’s at your door?” Pete asked with an uneasy feeling in his stomach.

The answer was as confusing as it was unsettling:

“A huge woman is trying to break into my apartment!”

## 4. The Mysterious Eagle Lady

Jupiter immediately went into action mode. “Did she realize you saw her?”

“No,” replied the visibly worried student. “I was waiting outside here for you to come when I saw this huge woman appear and went straight into the building. I’ve never seen her before, so I followed her. She went to my front door and rattled on the door handle. I then immediately came back down here to call to you. Fortunately you came in time.”

The First Investigator raised his index finger with a serious expression. “The most important thing now is to keep calm. Bob, get back in the car and be ready in case you need to follow her. Pete, you hide somewhere near the building’s main entrance and be on the lookout when she comes out of the building. Vincent, you lead me to your apartment.”

Jupiter and Vincent then put their mobile phones on silent mode so that no unexpected call could give them away.

The student opened the building’s front door as quietly as possible and both of them scurried into the unpleasantly humid interior. In fact, it seemed to be a few degrees hotter inside than outside.

The building was a typical functional building without any decorations—with grey walls, linoleum floors, and a row of letterboxes in the entrance area. One of the boxes was labelled ‘V. Barraford & J. Cummings’. To the First Investigator’s astonishment, the building was unusually quiet.

“Is there always so little going on here?” Jupiter asked in a whisper as they went up the dark staircase.

“Yes,” Vincent confirmed. “On weekends, most people are out at this time of the day. It’s not very pleasant in here when it’s this hot. There’s no air conditioning.”

A few seconds later, the two of them were a few steps away from the first floor. Vincent held Jupiter back and whispered: “On the left, at the very end of the corridor—the last door.”

Jupiter went ahead of Vincent but paused at the top step. He carefully stuck his head out and peered towards the left. At the furthest door, he saw a young, athletic woman with her back to him. She was fiddling with the door handle, trying to poke something into the keyhole—perhaps a lock pick.

The First Investigator noted that she was indeed huge, perhaps around two metres tall. She had shoulder-length jet-black hair and was wearing a dark leather jacket with an elaborately decorated eagle’s head made of rhinestones on the back.

The woman rattled the door handle with increasing vigour, but to no avail. Suddenly she let out a furious hiss: “*Sialan!*”

Jupiter reacted instinctively. While still at the top step but remaining hidden from the woman, he signalled to Vincent, who was standing behind him. The First Investigator then called out loudly: “I agree. This exam was a complete outrage! Ptolemaic Egypt, the last great Hellenistic empire, wasn’t part of the syllabus at all! I feel that I should complain to Professor Carswell.”

Vincent followed hesitantly: “Uh... yes, a real mess... and I’m already struggling in this course.”

The First Investigator then slowly stepped out of the staircase into the corridor with Vincent following.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jupiter noticed that the stranger quickly straightened up and put the small object in her trouser pocket. Then she suddenly turned her head. If the boys had aroused her suspicion, she didn't let it show. With a grim face, she acted as though she did not see the two of them, and walked casually towards the staircase.

As she was approaching, Jupiter guessed from her features that she could be Hispanic... or Polynesian... or even indigenous South East Asian. The First Investigator continued to talk to Vincent, pretending not to pay attention to the woman. With long strides and a raised chin, the 'Eagle Lady' trudged past them and descended the stairs. Although Vincent was a bit taller than Jupiter, the woman towered over the student by almost a head.

In a flash, the First Investigator pulled out his mobile phone and sent a message to Pete: 'She's coming. Follow her. We're staying.'

Jupiter waited a few seconds before he walked quickly back to the first floor landing where there was a window looking out to the front of the building.

Moments later, he saw the woman walking out of the building. Her striking jacket made her easy to recognize. She looked around several times, got into a small grey car and drove off.

Just then, Pete left his hiding place around some bushes and ran to Bob's Beetle. The next moment, Bob steered his car out and followed the Eagle Lady at a safe distance.

"Man, that was really quick to react," Vincent praised with relief. "I couldn't have thought of anything so quickly, let alone anything about Egypt. Really class!"

"It's all a question of practice," Jupiter replied with a smile. "As an investigator, you often find yourself in critical situations so you can't afford to be at a loss for improvisation." He then looked over to the door that the stranger had been tampering with. "More important than my distraction, however, is the lady it was aimed at."

Vincent nodded. "What could she possibly have wanted with us?"

"A very good question..." Jupiter, who had typed something into his mobile phone again. Then he paused in amazement. "Well, well... things are developing."

The student tilted his head in surprise. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I've just checked the translation of the exclamation that the Eagle Lady just made..." Now Jupiter made one of his notorious artificial pauses to create a dramatic effect.

"Namely?" asked Vincent impatiently. Of course, he wasn't yet familiar with the First Investigator's dramatization games, but he found this kind of play annoying—just as Pete and Bob so often did.

Jupiter raised his left eyebrow with a meaningful expression. "*Sialan* means something like 'damn'... in Indonesian."

Shortly after Bob and Pete had set off, the Second Investigator received another message from Jupiter: 'Can you talk on the phone?'

Pete replied in the affirmative. A few seconds later, his mobile phone rang. He quickly answered it: "What is it, Jupe?"

"News about the Eagle Lady. Just before she went out, she was swearing in Indonesian."

"Whoa..." Pete murmured.

"Of course, that doesn't prove anything," Jupe continued, "but there's a good chance that we have our first really hot lead in the direction of Sumatra with this woman, and therefore



also an important clue as to Jayden's whereabouts. So you mustn't lose sight of her under any circumstances!"

The Second Investigator groaned in annoyance. "Thank you very much for this. Bob and I were wondering whether we should go to the movies instead of following her."

Jupiter ignored the comment. "We'll be with you as soon as we've checked Jayden's room, so let us know where you're going."

"All right. Good luck!"

After hanging up, Pete briefed Bob on the latest developments.

"Amazing," said Bob. "The case is getting really interesting!"

## 5. Cotta Cannot Help

The silver-grey Mitsubishi Mirage hatchback weaved through the streets of Santa Monica in a north-westerly direction. In the meantime, Pete had tried to get information about the car's owner by calling Inspector Cotta and giving him the licence plate number.

The police inspector of Rocky Beach had often helped The Three Investigators in the past, albeit sometimes somewhat reluctantly. This time, however, Cotta remained firm. He could not access the police department's database without a 'solid basis for suspicion'. Full stop.

After the brief conversation had ended, Pete wordlessly pocketed his mobile phone.

"Am I right in assuming that your conversation won't be included in the list of our most successful phone calls?" Bob asked in a sarcastic tone.

Pete made an annoyed noise. "Not even in the top thousand..."

Fifteen minutes later, the Mitsubishi pulled into the car park of an obscure motel called 'Shears Inn' located in another part of Santa Monica.

After a quick assessment of the situation, Bob turned into a side street to park his car so that it was out of sight. He skilfully manoeuvred his Beetle behind a large rubbish container. Then he opened the glove compartment, took out a small pair of binoculars. At the same time, Pete sent Jupiter a text message with the location of where they were now. Both of them then got out of the car.

Together they hurried towards the motel. They were pleased to see from a distance that the Eagle Lady had opened the window of her room due to the persistently intense heat. She was currently pacing back and forth, obviously nervous, and appeared to be holding a mobile phone in her right hand. Even from a distance, it was clear from the woman's expression that she was anything but happy with the situation.

"Look!" Pete pointed to the right. "There's a snack bar opposite the motel. We can sit at a table outside and do our surveillance from there without attracting attention."

"Good idea, Pete." Bob grinned. "Later when Jupe comes, he will be glad that he can have lunch at the same time as doing investigation work."

After sitting down at one of the tables with colourful parasols, the boys ordered two ice-cold Cokes with lemon slices.

Pete closed his eyes briefly with pleasure after the first sip. "Heavenly... I really needed this now."

"I feel the same way," Bob agreed. "Sometimes it's just—" After a sideways glance at the motel, he widened his eyes. "What's she doing now?"

"On the surface, everything looks like a normal student's room," Jupiter realized after Vincent and he had taken a look at Jayden's room. "—Not particularly tidy, but not a mess like after a fight either. Were you able to see if anything was missing?"

"Yes, I've already checked." Vincent pointed to a large cupboard. "Some clothes and Jayden's boots aren't there. His large hiking backpack is also missing. He bought it before

our Oregon trip—one of his few major purchases that I know of.” Now the student pointed to the bathroom. “No toothbrush, no razor, no toiletry bag.”

“So he’s taken quite a few things with him,” muttered Jupiter.

Frowning, Vincent walked round the room again. “I haven’t found his wallet or passport yet... and his favourite hat either.”

“His favourite hat?” Jupiter asked in surprise. He hadn’t expected such information.

“Yes, a white leather Stetson that he got from his father for his sixteenth birthday. It’s a lucky item for him. Jayden practically never goes outside without it.”

“Quite revealing...” The First Investigator let his gaze wander. “The lack of signs of scuffle and the absence of the items in question could indicate that Jayden had left voluntarily. After all, no abductor would take toiletry items or conspicuous clothing items such as a white hat into consideration.”

“Good point,” Vincent remarked. “So are you assuming that it could have been something else?”

“Given the current state of affairs, it would simply be negligent to categorically rule out any possibility.” Frowning, Jupiter ran his hand over the various university exercise books and folders on the desk. “After all, you can fix up a crime scene afterwards so that nothing points to a crime.”

“That’s right.” Vincent turned to one of the windows. “—And then there’s this woman swearing in Indonesian who was determined to get in here. There must be a connection.”

“I agree with you wholeheartedly. It just cannot be a coincidence. However, the would-be intruder didn’t give the impression that she had much experience in opening locked doors.” The First Investigator wiped a disturbing strand of hair from his forehead. “Is it possible that Jayden could have made acquaintance with this woman without you knowing?”

“I can’t really imagine it. As I said, we’re always very open with each other about everything.” Vincent raised his shoulders. “Still, it’s not impossible, of course... but what reason would he have to keep this from me?”

“That remains to be seen...” Jupiter made a sweeping gesture with his hand. “Let’s take another good look around. There must be something here that the Eagle Lady wanted to get hold of.”

They carefully searched every nook and cranny, every cupboard, every shelf and every drawer, but nothing conspicuous came to light—with the exception of a ten-dollar banknote, which surprised Vincent because Jayden always kept his money very carefully.

The First Investigator examined the banknote. “No special features, writing or anything like that.” He handed it to the student. “It’s probably a dead end, but to be on the safe side, we should take it with us anyway.”

Suddenly Jupiter paused. His gaze had just caught on the upholstered swivel chair in front of the cluttered desk—more precisely, on the floor beneath it. He got down on his knees and picked up a small, silver object next to one of the castors.

“What have you got there?” Vincent asked curiously.

A smile played around the First Investigator’s lips. “—Possibly the reason for the Eagle Lady’s attempt to break in here...”

## 6. Greetings from Indonesia

Vincent took a step closer and scrutinized the shiny find.

“A pendant?”

“That’s right,” Jupiter confirmed. “It’s a silver pendant with a gold decorative feature in the centre, which can reveal something important.”

“Oh, and you think the woman lost this pendant and wanted to break in here to get it back?” Vincent asked.

“Wait a minute...” Jupiter took a compact folding magnifying glass out of his jeans pocket. Then he went to one of the two windows, where the light was better, and took a closer look at the pendant. “Aha... that’s what I thought.”

“What is it?” Vincent asked when Jupiter didn’t continue after a few seconds.

“The gold feature is a golden eagle—just like that on the back of the woman’s jacket.”

The student tilted his head in confusion. “So what? There are probably millions of such jewellery items with eagle designs. After all, the bald eagle is on the coat of arms of the US.”

“Right,” the First Investigator agreed, “but this isn’t a bald eagle. It’s the Garuda—a mythical golden eagle which it is on the coat of arms of Indonesia.”

Vincent was still not quite convinced. “How are you going to judge exactly what kind of eagle it is? The thing is tiny.”

“That’s why I needed these.” The First Investigator handed him the magnifying glass along with the pendant.

Vincent examined the eagle design with curiosity. “Hmm... well, head pointing to the left, curved beak, outstretched wings and talons... I know that it looks different from the eagle on our coat of arms, but then, it could just be any eagle.”

“If you don’t know what to look out for, it’s actually difficult to identify it,” Jupiter explained. “I know a lot about flags and coats of arms because we’ve sold items featuring emblems of various countries at our salvage yard.”

The young man took another look at the piece of jewellery. “So what do I need to look out for here?”

“Count the feathers on either one of the wings and then the feathers on the tail.”

Vincent hesitantly followed the request. “Not that easy...” After a short pause, he said: “If I haven’t miscounted, each wing has seventeen feathers and the tail has eight.”

“Correct,” replied Jupiter. “The numbers are symbolic and are characteristic of the Indonesian Garuda. They stand for the seventeenth day of the eighth month—17th August, which is the Indonesian day of independence. Moreover, if you bother to count more feathers, you would find 19 feathers below the shield, and 45 feathers on the neck. Put them together to get ‘1945’, hence giving the complete date of independence as 17th August 1945.”

The student was visibly impressed. “It’s incredible what you know...”

A familiar sparkle appeared in the eyes of the First Investigator. “The Sumatra connection in your friend’s disappearance seems to be getting stronger. It’s high time we found out what the Eagle Lady is really up to!”

Puzzled, Pete looked over to the motel. The sight that presented itself to the two boys was indeed quite strange. The Eagle Lady had stopped pacing around. Instead, she was standing with her back to the window, her clasped hands raised high above her head and slowly swaying her upper body back and forth.

“Is that... a dance?” Pete asked, puzzled.

Bob shrugged his shoulders helplessly. “Dance, exercise, some sort of ritual—I have no idea...”

The confused boys observed the strange behaviour of the Eagle Lady for several minutes.

Soon, Jupiter and Vincent arrived on the student’s motorbike. After sitting down with Bob and Pete and also ordering drinks, they told each other about what they had learned so far.

Jupiter then let out a soft sigh. “It’s really unfortunate that the inspector couldn’t help us with the licence plate number.”

“He didn’t want to,” Pete corrected. Then he imitated the inspector’s gruff voice: “The rules are the rules.”

Bob shrugged his shoulders. “You can understand that from his point of view—after all, we didn’t really have a reason to offer him.”

Jupiter nodded. “—Which highlights to us once again that we cannot always depend on the authorities for help. There are rules for the police, so we’ll have to find out the Eagle Lady’s identity without Cotta’s help.”

After a short pause, Jupiter looked round seriously. “Let’s summarize the current situation... There’s no evidence of a scuffle in Jayden’s room. Rather, he seems to have acted on his own free will and departed with some luggage, including his favourite hat.”

“However, it is still completely unclear why he did this and where he is now,” Bob added. “If he really is in Sumatra, there’s also the question of where all the money for the journey came from...” He opened his notebook. “—After all, a plane ticket from Los Angeles to Sumatra costs between two and four thousand dollars.”

“Man...” Vincent murmured.

Pete took another sip of cola. “Okay, let’s assume that Jayden really did travel to Indonesia. Wouldn’t it be possible that it was all organized by that woman over there?” He looked over to the Eagle Lady’s motel room again, where she was still making her strange movements. “Could be that she’s filthy rich... and the whole thing might be some kind of crazy love thing that nobody should know about—not even his best friend?”

“Counter-question...” the First Investigator said. “Why would a filthy rich woman drive a car far too small for her height and stay in a second-rate motel? Above all, what reason would she have for not travelling with her beloved Jayden?”

Pete scratched his head, frowning. “Right, that doesn’t really make sense.”

“Unless the original plan was different and there was suddenly a good reason for separate flights,” Bob suggested. “In any case, this strange lady and the pendant are our only links so far between Jayden and Indonesia. Whatever it is, our most important question is whether Jayden travelled voluntarily or under duress.”

“Well, if he really travelled halfway around the world for fun, without telling me about it, and sponsored by this woman, he’ll have a lot of explaining to do when he gets back,” Vincent muttered with a frown. He pointed to his mobile phone, which he had been typing into repeatedly over the past few minutes. “Among other things, he is now not replying to my text messages.”

“Very strange indeed,” Juve agreed, “but at least Jayden is still in possession of his mobile phone and can obviously use it to make calls at will. That could be taken as an

indication that he's not under anyone's control."

"—Although his calls to Vincent consisted of nothing more than confused drivel," Bob added. "Maybe someone behind the scenes wants Jayden to make the phone calls to create confusion."

Shaking his head, Pete leaned back in his chair. "—But why all this?"

"That's exactly what we need to find out now," the First Investigator said.

"After the latest developments, I'm sure you'll agree that this is a pretty crazy case," Pete added.

"Of course," Bob agreed.

Jupiter continued. "That's why I suggest we set a limit of, say, two days to investigate this matter."

"What if we don't succeed in these two days?" asked Bob.

"I'd be more interested in what happens if we do succeed," added Pete. "I mean—what do we do if we find out that Jayden is actually being held in Sumatra?"

"Those are two questions that lead to the same answer," Jupiter clarified. "If we can't establish Jayden's whereabouts within the time limit set or it turns out to be a criminal offence of some kind, the police will have to be called in."

"I can see that," Vincent replied. "So what do we do now?"

"Now..." replied the First Investigator, reaching for the colourful menu with a broad smile. "—We'll eat first."

## 7. A Strange Call for Help

In the minutes that followed, The Three Investigators and Vincent savoured the barbecue burgers, hot dogs, deep-fried onion rings, and chips with various sauces.

Full and satisfied, Jupiter helped himself to the last crumbs on his plate. "Mmm... I really needed that. I can't even remember when and what I had for breakfast."

"—And that's coming from someone with a photographic memory." Bob grinned. "Then you must have been really hungry."

"All the more important that we're all freshly fortified now," Pete added. With a skilful toss, he threw the crumpled-up burger wrapper into a bin three metres away.

"Once an athlete, always an athlete," commented Jupiter, who almost always missed the target with similar throws. Then he looked over to the Eagle Lady's room. "Look—the lady has finished her strange stand-up dance and is now sitting at the desk."

"—But she's not writing," Vincent said. "She's tinkering with something..."

Pete narrowed his eyes. "I'd love to know what it is... but it's impossible to see from here."

"Even binoculars won't help," Bob realized. "Her back is covering the crucial part of the table top."

"That's exactly why we should move on to the next stage of our investigation," Jupiter decided.

"Namely?" Vincent asked eagerly.

"Change of position and approach," Jupe replied. "We'll split up and each one of us move to another strategically favourable location to continue our surveillance."

"Good," Bob agreed. "I'll use the 'smokescreen tactic'."

"Maps, I suppose," Jupe asked.

"Maps it is..." Bob replied.

"What's that?" Vincent asked.

"We will use some items or do something to disguise our real intentions," Bob explained. "I'll get a street map from my car and then walk around studying it as if I am looking for a specific address—at least to the general public. In fact, I would be observing the target person in an inconspicuous manner."

"You do that, Bob," Jupe agreed. "By the way, get the three walkie-talkies in your car. It's faster to communicate with those than with mobile phones."

"There are a few places we could hide," Pete added, "for example, the hibiscus bushes next to the campervan in the car park. The motel room window is so low that you should have a good view of the desk from there."

Jupiter nodded. "Speaking of the campervan—the Eagle Lady's car is right next to it. Whoever takes this position should also take a look inside the Mitsubishi, perhaps there will be more clues."

Vincent raised his eyebrows appreciatively. "I can tell you're real professionals."

Bob smiled. "Ultimately, investigation work is also a craft. The more often you—"

At that moment, Pete's mobile phone rang. He didn't recognize the number, but he answered the call nonetheless: "The Three Investigators. Pete Crenshaw speaking."

“Hello, Pete,” came the conspicuously nasal voice of a young woman with an English accent. “You don’t know me—I’m Estelle Staceman.” She sounded worried. “This is going to sound strange, but I really need your help.”

“My help?” asked the Second Investigator, confused. “Hmm... but right now, my two colleagues and I are in the middle of a case.”

“I don’t need the help of the three of you—just you alone.”

“I see...” The Second Investigator was confused. “What exactly am I supposed to help you with? And how did you get my number?”

“I’ll explain all that to you when we meet,” the woman replied with noticeable tension. “I’m standing here in front of The Jones Salvage Yard. Mrs Jones told me that you’re away somewhere. Can you please come back as soon as possible?”

“Er... just a moment, please.” Pete used his thumb to cover the microphone of his mobile phone and turned to his friends, who, like Vincent, were looking at him intently. “It’s someone named Estelle Staceman who says she really needs my help—not the three of us, just me. She’s waiting for me at the salvage yard and wants me to go back there as soon as possible. She won’t tell me anything else until then.”

“Interesting,” replied Jupiter, frowning. “I suppose you can take some time off to comply with this request—that is if the task is not too time-consuming. At the moment, the three of us are well-positioned for the surveillance here. The problem is that we can’t do without Bob’s Beetle. After all, we might need to make more pursuits. Vincent’s motorbike is not sufficient for that.”

“I hadn’t even thought about that.” Pete held his mobile phone to his ear again. “Hello? I’d really like to help, but I don’t have my car with me now. Perhaps—”

“That’s no problem,” Estelle interrupted him. “You can take a taxi—I’ll cover the cost.”

“Uh... okay.” The Second Investigator tried to organize his thoughts, but it was pointless in view of the completely unclear situation. In the end, he listened to his gut feeling. “Right, then I’ll set off straight away. I should be with you in about half an hour.”

“Thank you!” Estelle sounded very relieved. “Thank you from the bottom of my heart!”

After Pete had hung up, he told them about the taxi offer.

Jupiter nodded. “Good, then we’ll go our separate ways for now. You meet this Estelle and we’ll try to find out more about the Eagle Lady.”

Pete left. Bob went back to his car and got his map and their three walkie-talkies. Then he showed Vincent how to use the communication device. The three of them then discussed on their roles.

Finally, the First Investigator stood up. “Right then—let’s get to work!”

Thirty-five minutes later, Pete arrived back at the salvage yard. A blonde, freckle-faced woman in her mid-twenties immediately approached the taxi and paid the driver, including a generous tip.

After the Second Investigator had got out, Estelle shook his hand effusively. “Thank you so much again for coming so quickly!”

“That’s okay.” Pete replied and then hesitated. He realized that if he showed his face in the salvage yard, Aunt Mathilda might order him to repair the trencher immediately.

“Shall we sit down over there?” Pete pointed to a small bench a bit further up on the pedestrian walkway.

“Gladly,” the woman replied.

“What’s this about?” Pete asked the woman once they had taken a seat.



The woman blew her nose noisily at first. "Sorry, allergy." Then she took a deep breath. "I think it's best if I start at the beginning."

"That's usually a good idea," Pete agreed.

"I... work as a lighting intern in Hollywood and have already worked on several movie shoots. That's where I met your dad, among others." A smile flitted across her previously very serious face. "I find him a very likeable and humorous man who gave me a lot of valuable advice."

Pete's father, Henry Crenshaw, worked as a special effects expert for many years and had come into contact with countless people from the movie industry.

Pete listened up. "I see... and my dad told you about our work as investigators, right?"

"Exactly," Estelle replied. "He told me about The Three Investigators in general and, of course, about you in particular. I've even seen you a few times, albeit only from a distance. I noticed that you can move around the various studio sites completely freely."

"That's right," confirmed the Second Investigator. "Most people know me because of my visits to Dad's set. I've also done loads of errands between studios and worked on a few productions myself. I always meet the same people, whether it's the movie crews or security staff."

"That's an important point," the woman explained, "but more on that in a moment. Anyway, your father said that if I was ever in trouble, I could always turn to him or you. He raved about your many talents and abilities. He also gave me your mobile phone number back then."

"So... now you're in a fix," Pete surmised.

"Yes... that is, not me directly, but my aunt, Lucyna Scantling."

"Lucyna Scantling?" the Second Investigator remarked in surprise. "The script writer? I know who she is... but it's been quite a while since we last bumped into each other. It must have been at least a year ago."

"I know—she told me about it. You took really good care of her when she accidentally twisted her ankle."

"That's right, she tripped over a mislaid cable." Pete leaned forward eagerly. "So what kind of problem does she have?"

Estelle's face darkened again. "You... have probably noticed that my aunt's career has been stagnating for a long time. Her last successful movie was years ago."

Pete nodded silently. He only spoke to Miss Scantling in passing, but he learned from conversations with his father that she was an immensely talented writer who had always been unlucky with the choice of subject matter for her projects.

"Then you know her script writing peculiarity?" the woman asked.

Pete raised his shoulders. "No. What peculiarity do you mean?"

"Aunt Lucyna has certain uncanny beliefs about some things. One of them is that she always types all her texts on her ancient Underwood typewriter. She firmly believes that true creative magic can only arise in this way—with a single original. Copies are only made once the script is complete."

Now it was the Second Investigator who smiled. "Everyone has their own peculiarities." He knew that such oddities were not so rare in Hollywood. Director and screen writer Quentin Tarantino, for example, was known not to use computers or typewriters when drafting his texts. Instead he wrote everything by hand.

Estelle nervously stroked her shoulder. "That peculiarity is the big problem now."

"You have to explain that to me," Pete asked her.

The answer that followed left him breathless for a moment:

“She wants to retrieve her script before it is destroyed.”

## 8. Pete Must Save the Galaxy

“Destroyed?” The Second Investigator’s jaw almost dropped. “You can’t be serious.”

“I would never joke about something like that,” Estelle replied.

“—But...” Pete’s mind was whirling wildly.

“I know it sounds pretty crazy, but I can explain it to you. My aunt has been writing the script for a science fiction comedy for over a year. She hopes this will be her big comeback in Hollywood. It’s as good as finished, but now Aunt Lucyna has found out that the production company is no longer interested in the project.”

“What are they planning to do?” Pete asked, confused.

“They want to make as if the script is stolen so that they will not have to proceed with the project. They may even destroy the script to cover up any traces, and at the same time collect a large insurance payout.”

Pete blinked, perplexed. As bizarre as this statement sounded, he had heard of similar incidents in the decades-long history of Hollywood. “How... does your aunt know that? It’s hardly the sort of thing you see on the notice board.”

“Of course not. A secretary friend of mine overheard a conversation and told her.” Estelle raised her hands in a helpless gesture. “That would be a huge disaster for Aunt Lucyna because there are no copies of the script made yet. The entire project would be irretrievably lost. She can’t turn to the police because there’s no evidence of this ploy... and the secretary doesn’t want to make an official statement because she’s afraid of losing her job.”

“Unbelievable...” The Second Investigator frowned. “Where’s the script right now? Can’t your aunt just put it in a safe place?”

“No, it’s in a wall safe at the Silverstar Pictures studio—in Room 27. The contract stipulates that it has to be stored there during breaks in writing.” She paused for a moment. “—And my aunt hasn’t written for eight days.”

“Why not?”

Estelle clenched her lips briefly. “She... was admitted to a clinic in LA because of a serious nervous condition.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that.” Pete remembered that his father had told him in the past about some of the health problems Miss Scantling had suffered on and off.

“Because of her condition, Aunt Lucyna is unable to retrieve the script herself even though she has access to the wall safe. She can’t hope for any help from another studio employee or movie crew because practically anyone could be involved in the ploy.”

She rubbed her reddened eyes. “My aunt... is completely dependent on this original. It’s completely out of the question for her to come up with a new version because of her illness. As you know, she is not getting any younger and her strength has greatly diminished. In her distress, she turned to me. I’m the only relative who lives near her. The rest of the family live in London.”

“So you remembered my father’s offer to turn to him or me if you ever got into trouble,” Pete concluded, “and because Dad is currently busy with a job in Nevada, you called me.”

“Exactly... and time is of the essence. Aunt Lucyna received the secretary’s message this morning. If she’s got it right, the theft of the script is supposed to happen tonight!” Estelle

took out her mobile phone. “—But it’s better if Aunt Lucyna tells you everything else herself.” She dialled a number and handed the mobile phone to the Second Investigator.

Unsure, he switched on the speakerphone and then said: “Hello? This is Pete Crenshaw.”

“H-hello, Pete. This is Lucyna Scantling.” The voice was clearly weak and faint, and Pete could barely recognize it. “I’m really very uncomfortable about this, but I just don’t know what else to do. You... you have to help me.”

Only now did the Second Investigator realize that his role in the whole affair had not been spelled out at all in the conversation with Estelle.

A queasy feeling immediately rose up inside him and, despite the heat, goose bumps ran down his spine. “Do I understand you correctly? You want me to get your script?”

“Yes...” Miss Scantling’s despair was palpable. “With the movie crew, I don’t know who’s involved... and I can’t send an outsider because he wouldn’t even be able to get onto the premises. I can’t send Estelle either, because she doesn’t work for this studio and therefore doesn’t have access authorization. You, on the other hand—”

“—I, on the other hand, don’t need such authorization,” Pete slowly completed the sentence. So now the cat was out of the bag, and it was a cat that the Second Investigator didn’t like at all.

“Of course I know that’s a lot to ask, but you’re the only one I can turn to. No one else would be suitable for this job. Only you are both inconspicuous and trustworthy to both the studio and security people.”

“Hmm...” the Second Investigator murmured, “but how exactly do you envisage the whole thing? How am I supposed to do it?”

“I’ve written down everything you need to know. Estelle will give you the note.”

The young woman nodded.

“I know the studio building inside out because I’ve always personally deposited the script in the wall safe over the past few months,” continued Miss Scantling. “That’s why I know the necessary access codes, the security patrol times and so on. If you put on the baseball cap my niece brought and keep your head down, you should have no trouble getting past the security cameras.”

“Wait a minute!” Pete’s eyes widened. “Do you mean you want me to... steal your script?”

“It’s not stealing,” Miss Scantling disagreed vehemently. “The script is my intellectual property—no ifs, ands or buts. That’s why it’s also my right to prevent its destruction.”

Pete stroked his free hand through his sweaty hair, perplexed. As difficult as it was, he had to stay calm and concentrate. What would Jupiter do in a situation like this? Think logically... of course.

“Er... but wouldn’t it be possible for you to simply issue me with a power of attorney so that I can officially collect the script on your behalf and then make copies immediately?”

“I have enclosed such a document, but...” Miss Scantling gave a long, worried-sounding cough. Then she continued hoarsely: “I am firmly convinced that you would be turned away on some, presumably legal, pretext. As long as the script is still in development, only I personally have access to it and no one else.”

Estelle nodded. “It wouldn’t be any different for me.”

Miss Scantling continued: “That’s why I’m asking you to only use this authorization document in an emergency,”

“—Such as in the case I’m found out,” Pete muttered, barely audible.

“The studio wants to get rid of the script at all costs,” Miss Scantling continued. “Estelle might have already told you that they plan to do it tonight, at the latest. However, if they

realize that their plan has been leaked, it would probably only speed things up.”

Miss Scantling’s voice now sounded choked with tears. “My script must be saved at all costs. Even if I can’t continue working with this studio, the story is so good that I could start another attempt somewhere else... Maybe... it’s the very last chance of my career.”

For a moment, the Second Investigator didn’t know what to say.

Lucyna Scantling’s tone was now almost pleading and her already weak voice was trembling. “Please, Pete... You are my last hope. Only you can save the *Golden Galaxy* script.” She coughed again. “—And... my future.”

Pete’s throat was suddenly very dry. He had to think of Jupiter again... and of Bob.

Under normal circumstances, of course, he would have contacted his friends to inform them of the unbelievable task... but he couldn’t jeopardize the other task in Santa Monica. A phone call was not possible as the two of them routinely switched off their mobile phones during such events. Even a text message, or the reaction to it, could pose a risk if the person under surveillance was very close. Therefore, the Second Investigator had no choice but to make this decision all by himself.

Pete straightened up and looked deeply into the eyes of Estelle, who had been watching him hopefully the whole time. Then he said into the phone:

“Miss Scantling... I’ll take your case.”

## 9. More Drama in Sumatra

In the meantime, the surveillance of the Eagle Lady was in full swing.

As discussed, Bob had taken up position leaning against a street lamp with his unfolded road map, while Jupiter had positioned himself at a cleverly chosen angle between the Mitsubishi and the campervan. He could be seen neither from the motel nor from the road. Vincent, who had no investigation experience, had remained seated in front of the snack bar. If he noticed any approaching danger, he would contact the two investigators using the walkie-talkie.

Unfortunately, the inspection of the small car had not led to any new findings. There were no personal belongings in the interior—literally nothing at all. Added to this was the conspicuous, almost sterile cleanliness, which led the First Investigator to assume that it was either a new car or a rented one. Unfortunately, this did not help him identify the Eagle Lady.

A glance at the desk in the motel room was more productive. However, this only added to the confusion surrounding the Eagle Lady. As she leaned back for a moment, Jupiter realized that she was fiddling with a red and blue rotating beacon, such as those used on police or fire service vehicles. But what did that mean? The woman would hardly be planning to equip her small car with this warning light in order to quickly get through the traffic. Whatever she was doing now, it didn't fit with her earlier strange dance routine.

When Jupiter looked over at Bob, he realized from the shrug of his friend's shoulders that neither of them could make sense of the situation.

Meanwhile, Pete and Estelle had reached the fenced-in studio premises in her Volvo. Estelle grabbed a cap from the back seat of her car and handed it to Pete. It was a navy blue baseball cap with a large red letter 'C' in front.

During the journey, the Second Investigator had carefully studied the sheet of paper on which Miss Scantling had jotted down in shaky handwriting. He memorized all the important information about the security precautions on the way to the wall safe, including two access codes—one for entry into Room 27, and the other for opening the safe. Then he folded the paper along with Miss Scantling's authorization and put them in the back pocket of his jeans. Nevertheless, he was anything but comfortable about this assignment.

Estelle seemed to have noticed that. "You're not sure if you want to do this."

The Second Investigator cleared his throat. "I... would really like to help your aunt... but what happens if security catches me and they think your aunt's authorization is a forgery? Or if I'm recognized later on the security cameras despite wearing a cap? Then I'll be accused of stealing the script... and that could not only have bad consequences for me, but also for my dad."

Estelle put a hand on Pete's shoulder. "Of course I fully understand your concerns, but you really don't need to worry about that. I promise you in all sincerity that my aunt will relieve you in every conceivable way. It's her script—and she has every right in the world to authorize you to retrieve it. So don't worry about any negative consequences for you or your dad."

She glanced over at the multi-storey studio building. “The crucial point is that the script will be stolen and destroyed if you don’t get it out of the safe in time. That would be the irrevocable end of *Golden Galaxy*.” Tears glimmered in her eyes. “—And my aunt wouldn’t be able to cope with that. It would be the end of her...”

Pete took a deep breath. Rarely had so much responsibility weighed on his shoulders. However, he simply couldn’t let Lucyna Scantling down.

“Okay.” He opened the passenger door and put on the baseball cap. “Wish me luck.”

The burly security guard at the gate knew the Second Investigator from various encounters and was always up for a chat. He tapped his cap with a smile. “Mr Crenshaw junior—what brings us this honour? And how is your dear father?”

Pete also endeavoured to smile. He liked the always friendly Terry Cillian, but he didn’t have the time or the nerve for small talk right now. “Dad’s doing great. He’ll probably be back from Nevada the day after tomorrow.”

“Please say hello to him for me,” Mr Cillian said.

“Yeah, sure...” Pete replied and glanced at his watch. “I have to go as I’m supposed to pick something up.”

Mr Cillian made a welcoming gesture with his hand. “Go on ahead!”

As easy as it was for Pete to enter the grounds, access to the studio building was equally straightforward. There was still a good half hour until the next security patrol—plenty of time for his task. He made his way through the corridors with his face facing down almost all the time. The few employees he came across took no notice of him.

Finally, he was at the door to Room 27 and he keyed in the access code on the keypad. The door opened, he went in and closed the door.

As Lucyna Scantling had predicted, there was no one in the room that Saturday afternoon. He then entered the second access code on the keypad of the wall safe. There was a short beep and he pulled open the safe door.

There was only one folder there as Miss Scantling had indicated in the note. Pete noticed that it was unlabelled, but he couldn’t spare any time to check the contents. He grabbed the folder, tucked it into his back waistband, and pulled his shirt over it.

Then the Second Investigator made his way out. So far, everything went according to plan, and he did not have to speak to anyone in the building.

Shortly afterwards, less than ten minutes after his arrival, he was back at the gate.

“You’re back! That was quick,” Terry Cillian remarked. “So, did everything work out?”

Pete shook his head. “It was probably a misunderstanding. I’ll come again in the next few days.”

The security guard raised his hand in greeting. “You know—you’re always welcome here.”

After exiting the studio’s premises, Pete quickly got back into Estelle’s car.

The young woman looked at him with wide eyes. “Well?”

Smiling, Pete pulled the folder out from his back under his shirt. “Your aunt’s script is in no danger from now on.”

Sobbing, the young woman threw her arms around Pete’s neck and hugged him tightly. “Thank you, thank you, thank you! I... don’t even know what to say.”

““Thank you” will do,” Pete replied with a wink and playfully indicated a bow.

"I have to call Aunt Lucyna right now," Estelle dialled a number on her mobile phone and held it up to her ear. "Aunt Lucyna? Estelle. Guess what? Pete's got your script. It's with me now..." She listened on the phone for a brief moment before finally said: "Yes, I get it to you immediately." Then she hung up.

"My aunt is very grateful and asked me to thank you on her behalf," she told Pete. "You might not know what this means to her."

"It was a pleasure for The Three Investigators, represented by the Second Investigator, to assist you and your aunt in this particular emergency." He pointed ahead. "—But now we should better go away from here. Better safe than sorry."

Estelle suddenly looked embarrassed. "Please don't take offence, but I need to get to my aunt's clinic as quickly as possible. If it's okay with you, I'll give you the money for a taxi."

"No problem," Pete replied hesitantly. He was a little taken aback, but of course he understood the request.

Estelle fished out a couple of dollars from her pocket and handed them to Pete. "This should be enough for you to get back to Santa Monica."

"Yes, that should be fine," Pete replied. "Thank you."

"I'll never forget this, Pete Crenshaw," Estelle said as the Second Investigator was getting out of the car. "Aunt Lucyna will be in touch with you very soon. Please say hello to Jupiter and Bob for me!"

A few seconds later, Pete stood at the side of the road. The woman rolled down the driver's window and waved. Pete returned the wave and looked at the Volvo as it sped off in a hurry. It almost seemed to him as if it had all just been a strange dream.

After several minutes of toying with the beacon, the Eagle Lady's actions became even more puzzling when she suddenly put a travel bag on the desk, pulled out a flower garland and hung it at the window. She then used threads to attach to it various objects that looked like trinkets.

The First Investigator was at his wit's end. He simply couldn't explain what was going on here.

Suddenly, a crackling sound came from his walkie-talkie that jolted him out of his thoughts. That was Vincent's danger signal! The next moment, his voice was heard: "Come back quick! It's urgent!"

A few seconds later, Jupiter and Bob had taken their seats next to Vincent again. The student was beside himself. With a trembling hand, he held his mobile phone out to the investigators.

"It's a video call from Jayden!"

Bob and Jupiter looked at the display, mesmerized. They could see an exotic jungle landscape in bright daylight with a towering mountain range in the background. The person shooting the video with the camera facing forwards was walking through the jungle. Only the surroundings were visible.

Then a rushed, fear-distorted voice was heard:

*"They're here! They're coming! I have to get out of here! Now!"*

Vincent stared at the boys with wide eyes. Then he held the mobile phone to his lips. "Jayden! Jayden! Answer me!"

There was no response. The corners of Vincent's mouth twitched. "—But... that can't possibly be—"



He didn't get any further, because a shrill scream rang out from the mobile phone's speaker:

*"Nooooo! They've locked everything! I'm trapped!"*

Suddenly the perspective changed. The man was obviously running back the way he had come. He gasped in panic:

*"They're going to get me!"*

A backpack now appeared in the video, in which someone was frantically rummaging around in it. On the front was a black handwritten name of 'Jayden Cummings'.

*"My knife... where is my knife?"*

Then there was a pause.

*"Oh no... they've surrounded me."*

Then there was a stifled cry. The next sentence made even the usually calm First Investigator flinch:

*"Tell Dad I love him very much..."*

At that moment, the connection was broken.

Bob and Jupiter didn't get a chance to think clearly, because Vincent now raised his arm and pointed towards the motel with an outstretched index finger.

"The woman! She's gone!" His head whirled round in the direction of the road. "There! Her car! She's driving off!"

Before the investigators were able to react, the student dashed to his motorbike and sped off, chasing after the Mitsubishi.

Stunned, Bob stared at the First Investigator. "What?"

"Let's go!" Jupe jumped up and started to run.

However much the boys hurried, by the time they reached Bob's Beetle in the side street and drove off, the grey compact car and Vincent's motorbike were already out of sight.

"Bummer!" Bob muttered in frustration. "How could this have happened to us?"

## 10. A Phone Call Changes Everything

After several minutes, rather than circling around aimlessly looking for a Mitsubishi Mirage, Bob and Jupiter decided that they had to abandon the pursuit. To decide how to proceed, Jupiter called Pete to get an update from him.

The Second Investigator was in a taxi on his way back to Santa Monica. He answered after the first ring.

“Hello, Jupe! How are things with you? Have you found out who the Eagle Lady is?”

“To say that would be the exaggeration of the year,” replied the First Investigator irritably. “Not only do we not know who she is, but we’ve also let her slip through our fingers. Our only hope now is Vincent, who is following her on his motorbike.”

“Oh?”

“—And what’s your ominous emergency?” Jupiter changed the subject.

“Oh... mission completed successfully,” Pete replied, not without a certain amount of pride. “The whole thing was really incredible, but I’ll tell you about it later. Where should we meet?”

They agreed to meet back at the snack bar opposite the Shears Inn motel. It would take Pete a while to get there, though.

When Bob and Jupiter arrived at their destination, Jupiter immediately ordered a large sundae with whipped cream.

Meanwhile, Bob dialled Vincent’s mobile phone number. Shaking his head, he put his mobile phone down on the table. “He’s not answering, but that could be because he’s still on the road and can’t answer.”

“Let’s hope so,” Jupiter replied, vigorously ramming his spoon into a large scoop of vanilla ice cream. “—Because at best, that would mean he’s still hot on the woman’s heels.”

Thoughtfully, Bob looked over to the Eagle Lady’s motel room window which was now closed, and the flower garland was no longer hanging there.

“Do you think she realized she was being watched and then took the opportunity to escape when we were momentarily distracted?”

“It’s at least a reasonable assumption,” Jupiter replied. “Maybe she got suspicious in the corridor outside Vincent’s apartment and hasn’t let us out of her sight since.”

Bob scratched his ear. “—But then what was all that crazy behaviour in her room about?”

“A very good question, along with all the others.” The First Investigator gulped down the last spoonful of ice-cream. “As long as we have to wait for Vincent’s call, we should start at the only point where further investigations can be carried out—provided we can gain access.”

Bob nodded. “I suppose you mean the motel room. I don’t think it’s likely that the lady checked in under her real name, but—”

Jupiter’s mobile phone rang at that moment. When he saw who was calling, he blurted out: “It’s a video call from Vincent!” He quickly switched on the speakerphone on his device. “Hello, Vincent! What happened?”

“Everything and nothing at all,” came the confusing reply. The student sounded both frustrated and annoyed.

“That... I don’t understand,” the First Investigator admitted. It was an extremely rare admission from him. “Have you caught up with the woman?”

Vincent shook his head. “Not caught up with her. She was waiting for me.”

“What?” Bob gasped. He could hardly believe this turn of events.

“She drove straight back to my apartment building and waited for me at the entrance,” the student explained. “Now she’s here in my apartment.”

“What?” The First Investigator’s eyes widened. “She’s with you in your apartment now?”

“Yes,” Vincent confirmed.

“Is she threatening you?” Jupe probed further. “Should we call for help?”

“No, there’s no threat.” Now came the next shocker: “—And there hasn’t been an abduction either. It was all one big hoax.”

Vincent swivelled his mobile phone so that the Eagle Lady came into view. She was sitting on a green sofa and smiled uncertainly. However, it was clear from her face that she was very uncomfortable with the situation.

“I... didn’t realize you’d taken all this seriously,” she said into the camera. “Jayden told me that the whole thing was a visual perception experiment.”

“Huh?” Bob didn’t understand a word. “—But Jayden is studying economics, not psychology.”

“I didn’t know that,” the woman replied. “He told me that everyone involved knew what it was about.”

“Unbelievable,” Bob muttered.

“I’ve only known Jayden for a short time from basketball training,” the woman continued. “I liked him straight away, which is why I did him this unusual favour. Before he left for Sumatra, he told me exactly what I should do and you would then follow me. He also gave me the stuff in my bag.

“Twenty minutes ago, he sent me a text message to say that the experiment was over. I was to come back here and he will contact me for a debriefing session.” She sighed. “I had no idea that it would turn out this way.”

Jupiter rubbed his throbbing forehead. “So Jayden actually travelled to Indonesia on his own initiative?”

Now Vincent turned his phone camera back to himself. “Yes. It was voluntarily and funded by the college. Jayden just called me here and told me everything. I can’t remember all the details now as it was just too much, but he’s in an academic project in partnership with the State University of Medan, for which he and six other team members are spending a week there. He kept it all secret from me.”

“—But why didn’t he tell you?” Bob asked. “—And what was he up to with all that prisoner madness in the jungle?”

“A bet!” Vincent burst out. “The whole thing is a stupid bet he made with two friends to prove how gullible I am! It’s supposedly a revenge against me for messing up his birthday party a month ago by arguing with several guests. I can’t believe all this!”

“You’re not alone...” Jupiter replied with a veiled look.

Vincent bit his lower lip. “I can’t tell you how incredibly embarrassed I am about all this and how sorry I am that I got you into this childish nonsense.”

“I’m sorry too, boys!” the woman called out from the background.

Vincent wiped his hair with his free hand. “You can be quite sure that I’ll take Jayden to task when he gets back. Whatever he has won in his bet, I will claim a share, which I will send to you... as compensation.”

The First Investigator shook his head defensively. “That’s really not necessary, just—”  
“—But I insist! I owe it to you,” Vincent interrupted him. His facial features gradually relaxed a little. “The only good thing about the whole mess is that Jayden’s fine. Nothing bad has happened, apart from the uncalled-for drama he created.”

“I’ll just leave this as it is,” replied the First Investigator with barely suppressed frustration. He had a few other words on the tip of his tongue for Vincent’s friend’s behaviour. “Let’s just say that the mystery of the prisoner in Sumatra is over.”

After the conversation had ended, Bob and Jupiter just sat there silently with brooding eyes.

“So...” Bob finally regained his voice. “—The ‘drama in Sumatra’ was about a bet... and the trail of the Eagle Lady was a visual perception experiment... That didn’t really happen, did it?”

Jupiter lowered his head and looked at the delicate blades of grass between the concrete slabs at his feet. “If not, we just have had the same idiotic daydream at the same time. Perhaps we should get our heads checked, just to be sure.”

Both boys were relieved when Pete arrived in a taxi shortly afterwards and sat down with them. That brought a little normality back into the bizarre situation.

“Say, Pete,” Bob said, “I didn’t notice you wearing that baseball cap earlier. What does the ‘C’ in front stand for? Crenshaw?”

“Uh, oh!” Pete remarked. “Miss Staceman gave it to me to wear for the assignment. I forgot to give it back to her. Anyway, the ‘C’ logo is that of the Cleveland Guardians. She might be one of their fans.”

The First Investigator was still deep in thought over the whole affair. The matter frustrated him so much that he wasn’t paying attention to his friends. Then he decided that it might be best to wrap things up and be done with it.

“Okay,” he interrupted his friends, “let’s get back to the matter on hand.”

The Second Investigator listened to his friends’ unbelievable report in complete amazement.

“This is pure madness,” muttered Pete afterwards. Then a meaningful smile flitted across his face. “—But I think I can top that...”

A few minutes later, Jupiter leaned back in his chair in amazement. “That’s really something new—a script writer having her own script stolen.”

“Not stolen... but retrieved,” the Second Investigator corrected him. “I wouldn’t have agreed to steal anything. After all, the script is Miss Scantling’s property, which I have retrieved on her behalf.”

“It’s all right,” Jupiter reassured him. “I would probably have done the same if I were you. The movie business is a shark tank—relentless and ruthless. An extraordinary challenge like this requires an appropriate response.”

“I agree,” Bob said. “I thought Miss Scantling’s last few movies were pretty forgettable because of various technical blunders, but that doesn’t justify destroying what might be her last chance of a Hollywood comeback.”

“It’s very pleasing to note that we are all in agreement.” Pete nodded with satisfaction. “I’ll be curious to see if the whole thing gets through to the press later.”

Suddenly Jupiter turned pale and his hands tightened around the back of his chair. “Stupid... I was really stupid!” It was no more than a whisper.

“Are you all right?” Bob asked in confusion.

The First Investigator slapped his forehead. “How stupid was I to have missed that!”

## 11. Tell-Tale Signs

Jupiter's exclamation had been so loud that several snack bar guests turned to the boys in surprise.

Pete furrowed his brow in confusion. "Jupe, it's admirable that you admit that you can be stupid like everyone else, but can you please get to the point?"

Jupiter ignored the remark and stared excitedly at his friends. "In the latest video call from Vincent, he said that the Eagle Lady was in his apartment. When she spoke, she was sitting on a green sofa!"

"A green sofa..." Bob repeated. "So?"

"When I was in Vincent's apartment earlier, there was no green sofa!" Jupiter revealed.

"Okay," Pete spoke up, "but you could have been mistaken if you had focussed more on getting other clues in the apartment."

The First Investigator shook his head with a deadly serious expression. "No, that's not possible. You know how good my memory is. I went into all the rooms in that apartment, and there was no green sofa."

"That means that Vincent made that video call from somewhere else," Bob surmised. "What does that mean now?"

Jupiter made a sweeping gesture. "It means that Vincent had lied to us and something fishy is going on here."

"Wow..." Pete murmured, perplexed.

"Hold on here!" Bob then spoke up. "I may have spotted something else, but I have to do a quick check."

Bob grabbed his mobile phone and typed several terms into a search engine. About half a minute later, Bob said: "Aha! Jupe, you're right. Something fishy is really going on here."

"What do you have?" Jupe asked.

"It's Jayden's latest video call," Bob said, "either the video was pre-recorded, or it wasn't shot in Sumatra... or both."

"How could you tell?" Jupe asked.

"Remember that the call was received by Vincent around 1:15 pm?" Bob said. "We are in Pacific Daylight Time, which is the UTC-7 time zone. Sumatra is in UTC+7, which means that they are ahead of us by 14 hours. So at 1:15 pm, guess what time it was in Sumatra? ... 3:15 am! However in the video, you could see the jungle and mountain scene in bright daylight... so it's a complete fraud!"

"Excellent work, Bob," Jupe praised. "Really excellent!"

"Wow..." Pete murmured again. "Slowly we are uncovering a load of lies."

"Let me check on something else..." Bob again grabbed his mobile phone and typed onto it.

Over the next few minutes, he quickly browsed through several web pages, which obviously included videos and audio recordings, as snippets of words could sometimes be heard coming from the mobile phone speaker.

Suddenly Bob let out a surprised gasp: "No way!"

Jupe moved his chair closer in an instant. "What more have you discovered?"

"I typed in the keywords 'Jayden', 'Cummings', and 'Sumatra' to see what comes up."

"—And what did you get?" Pete asked impatiently.

"The video we saw was copied off the Internet..." Bob held out his mobile phone to his friends, pointed to a caption in the travel portal he had called up and scrolled down a little. "This video was made by Jayden Cummings—a backpacker from England who documented his journey through Sumatra in several videos... and guess what? He posted them seven years ago!"

Jupiter stumbled. "What?"

"There's more to it," Bob continued. "The original video here has a different audio track... Listen..."

Now Bob pressed the play button. The video that was now playing was undoubtedly the jungle footage shown by their ex-client. However, the male voice that could be heard was completely different, much deeper than that of Jayden... and he didn't sound frightened or even panicky, but calm and cheerful. There was no mention of 'somebody coming', 'having to get out of there', or 'everything being locked'. Instead, he made various comments about the jog he had just did, the jungle vegetation, and the route planning for the following day. In addition, he regretted that he had missed photographing a white-handed gibbon earlier because he hadn't had his camera ready. In the end, he rummaged through his backpack—not looking for a knife, but for a can of baked beans for lunch.

"So the whole drama was created by a fake soundtrack superimposed over a real video that was posted on the Internet seven years ago," the First Investigator summarized, his face petrified. "We have the alleged phone calls, the credible assurances of our client, and the Indonesian connections of the Eagle Lady—all of which combined to create a detailed picture of a mentally disturbed student in Sumatra."

Pete grimly crossed his arms. "Man, we've really been had..."

Bob scrolled a little further. "The various videos posted by Jayden Cummings the backpacker have an average of 150 to 300 views, so the likelihood of us having seen his videos before was practically zero."

"—And after the 'harmless' resolution from earlier, we would have had no reason to carry out any further investigation," added the First Investigator. "Our client couldn't have guessed that we'd be pricking up our ears and investigating because of a green sofa."

"More like being eagle-eyed," Pete added with a wry smile. "You can always rely on your super-sharp senses. Does that mean this whole operation and everything surrounding it was put out for us?"

"Everything points to that," Jupiter confirmed, "however, this begs the question—*Cui bono*?"

"*Cui* what?" asked the Second Investigator, confused.

"*Cui bono* is Latin. The phrase comes from the famous Roman orator Cicero," explained Bob, who had amassed a wealth of knowledge in the course of all his research. "It means something like: 'Who benefits?' It's one of the most important questions in solving crimes."

"Well summarized," praised Jupiter, pinching his lower lip as he always did when he had to crack a particularly tough nut. "It's simply paradoxical. If they wanted to take us for a ride and then ridicule us as investigators, they could have done it all very differently—for example, by convincing us of the missing student and then coming out and say: 'Ha! Fooled you clowns!'"

"Yes..." Bob agreed. "Instead, these guys go to great lengths to fake a video to back up a hair-raising hoax story, which they then debunk it and apologize to us, so this whole

painstakingly hyped-up case disappears into nothingness..." He shook his head uncomprehendingly. "What do they get out of it?"

"Let's just ask our former client!" Jupiter energetically pulled out his mobile phone and switched on the speakerphone so that his friends could listen in.

After ringing twice, the call was answered: "Yes?"

"Hello, Vincent." The First Investigator deliberately emphasized the name. "This is Jupiter again."

"Jupiter?" There was confusion and mistrust in his voice. "What... is it?"

"We'd like to meet up with you again. It won't take long."

"What's it about?" Vincent replied. "It's all sorted out."

"Not quite," Jupiter disagreed amiably. "We still have a few minor questions."

"What questions?" The voice sounded much harsher now. "The whole thing was a stupid bet by Jayden. That's all there is to it."

"We disagree," replied the First Investigator, "but we'd better discuss that in person."

Then came a brief silence, followed by an answer in a sharp tone of voice: "That's not possible. I'm on my way to college right now for a weekend seminar followed by an exam... and I'm running late."

That was obviously a lie, because Vincent would hardly be on the phone while he was riding his motorbike. There was also no engine noise in the background.

"You're walking to your college?" the First Investigator asked bluntly.

There were another few seconds' pause at the other end of the line. "What's it to you how I get to my college? Anyway, the case is closed! I hired you three because I thought my friend was in danger, but that's not the case." Now open anger came through. "That's why I'm saying here and now as your former client that I don't need you anymore! There is no reason for another meeting on this matter, so leave me alone!"

Suddenly there was a muffled sound of someone blowing the nose in the background. This was immediately followed by the creaking of a door and the conspicuously nasal voice of a woman saying: "Mission completed successfully, your—"

"Shush!" That was Vincent interrupting before the connection was abruptly cut.

Bob leaned forward with a look of disbelief. "What... was that?"

Jupiter stared at his mobile phone. "That was apparently the miraculous transformation of a mild-mannered Vincent into an angry one... and who is definitely not on his way to college. What's more, we can now assume with certainty that there is an accomplice who is not the Eagle Lady. Her voice sounds very different... with a different accent... more like—"

The First Investigator paused as he noticed that Pete's face had suddenly taken on the colour of the white snack table. He stared into nothingness in a stiff stance.

"Pete, what's wrong?"

The Second Investigator's forehead broke out in a cold sweat. What he said now completely overturned everything that had gone before:

"The woman in the background... just now... that was Estelle!"

## 12. Major Setbacks

It took Bob and Jupiter a moment to regain their voice.

“Lucyna Scantling’s niece?” Jupiter asked, perplexed. “Are you sure about that?”

Pete nodded silently. “Estelle has a distinct English accent, and while with me, she sneezed several times because of an allergy...”

Bob wiped his face in confusion. “—But how can that be? We—” He paused because the Second Investigator suddenly raised his left arm in slow motion, as if to answer a teacher’s question.

“I just remembered something...” Pete’s eyelids twitched. “Jupe, Estelle claimed to have spoken to your aunt before calling me. Did you tell your aunt that we are here in Santa Monica?”

“Nope,” Jupe replied, “and she didn’t ask either.”

“After Estelle said she had to rush off to her aunt,” Pete continued, “she gave me enough money for a taxi to get me back here to Santa Monica. In the first place, I never mentioned to her that I was earlier here.”

“So someone must have told her...” Bob paused and then looked at Pete. “Wait, Pete! This baseball cap you are wearing, the one Estelle gave you... what cap did you say it was?”

“Cleveland Guardians,” Pete said. “Why?”

“That’s it!” Bob said excitedly. “Do you remember that Vincent told us that Jayden’s favourite baseball team is the Cleveland Guardians?”

“Oh, gosh!” Pete remarked. “This cap here could very well belong to Jayden. Is it too far-fetched to say that the three of them are somehow in this together?”

“Little by little we are starting to see the whole picture,” Jupiter said, while pinching his lower lip. “There is a distinct possibility that we’ve been taken for a ride in two seemingly separate situations...”

The Second Investigator still couldn’t believe the latest turn of events. “I... just can’t imagine what Miss Scantling’s niece has to do with those two conmen. There’s absolutely no connection between the two cases.”

“Please don’t confuse facts with assumptions based on a lack of information,” Jupiter advised. “At first glance, a connection does indeed seem absurd, but I don’t believe that it is a coincidence that Estelle just appeared in the same place as Vincent.”

“By the way, Bob,” Pete said, “did you say that Vincent received that last call from Jayden at 1:15 pm?”

“Yes,” Bob replied, “plus or minus a minute or so.”

“Come to think of it,” Pete continued, “after I handed the folder to Estelle, she called Miss Scantling to tell her about it. Could it be that she called Vincent or Jayden instead... to proceed with their fake video call? That was around the same time at 1:15 pm. I know because a while later, I did look at my watch before calling for a taxi.”

“Hmm... that ties in very well,” Bob remarked.

“I am of the opinion that right from the start, they wanted to prevent us from stopping Pete from taking on the task,” Jupiter said grimly.



“That’s why they distracted us with the Sumatra show and the antics of the Eagle Lady,” added Bob. “With such a bizarre scenario, we had to bite. At 1:15 pm, when Vincent learned from Estelle that the script was safe, he called us back for Jayden’s video call.”

Jupiter nodded. “In this way, he captured our attention so that the Eagle Lady could escape. Then Vincent took off on his motorbike so quickly that it was impossible for us to catch up with either of them. His later call about the alleged bet was intended to reassure us that there was no case to solve. Knowing this, we could confidently put the whole matter to bed.”

“It would almost have worked if Jupe hadn’t spotted the green sofa,” Bob added. “What about Miss Scantling? Do you think she was part of the ploy?”

“If she was indeed part of it as what Estelle told me, I can kind of understand that,” Pete said. “After all, it might be her last chance to save her career... However, I feel that to put on the Sumatra show is really quite cheeky... more so if the purpose of it was to make sure that you didn’t talk me out of getting the script for her.”

“I wouldn’t disagree with that at all,” the First Investigator replied. “From Miss Scantling’s point of view, the lies and drama were necessary to make the operation possible in the first place. The crucial point is that the people involved are now so keen to cut all links with us.”

“True,” Bob agreed. “If it was really only about retrieving the script, they could put all their cards on the table with us now that they’ve successfully secured it.”

“—Unless there’s another reason why they want to avoid any contact with us now,” Jupiter pondered.

“Maybe they want to be gone before the studio discovers the script missing,” Bob suggested.

“Yes, but that will be soon,” Pete said. “Both Estelle and Miss Scantling told me that the script was planned to be stolen tonight. That’s probably when the studio will discover that it is already gone. Perhaps I saved them the trouble of stealing it.”

“Don’t forget,” Bob spoke up, “we cannot be sure how Miss Scantling is involved in all this.”

There was a brief moment of silence before the First Investigator said: “This gives us a couple of hours to clear up the matter before the folder is discovered missing.”

“Hmm...” Pete paused for a moment, then hastily took out his mobile phone and dialled a number.

“Yes, Pete?” his father’s voice answered after several rings.

“Hello, Dad. Do you have a minute?”

“If it’s really only a moment,” replied Mr Crenshaw. “We’re about to start filming here.”

“No problem. Did you happen to hear that Lucyna Scantling is in hospital in LA right now?”

“Lucyna? In hospital?” Mr Crenshaw was audibly confused. “I don’t know anything about that, but wait a minute—I’ll ask a colleague.”

For about a minute, there was only a muffled murmur of voices. Then his father spoke up again. After a brief hesitation, the visibly shaken Second Investigator asked: “Er... could you please make another enquiry about a movie project? It’s really important.”

Mr Crenshaw did his son this favour too. After Pete had finished talking, Jupiter turned round to his silent friend in the back seat, puzzled.

“So, what did your father say?”

Pete massaged the bridge of his nose thoughtfully. It took him a while before he could answer. “Miss Scantling... is not currently working on a science fiction movie. My dad has

not heard of a movie project named ‘Golden Galaxy’ ... unless it’s a working title that he is not aware of.”

“Wow...” Bob breathed, and then he hesitated. “—But... couldn’t it be that this is a secret project that outsiders don’t know about yet?”

Pete shook his head. “If what I was told that the script is as good as finished, then at such a stage, many things should have already been planned—production, direction, music and so on. So it would definitely be known in Hollywood if there is a movie called ‘Golden Galaxy’.”

“Yes, Pete...” Jupiter added with a serious expression. “—Considering the number of lies we have been told today, the Miss Scantling you spoke to could also be an impostor, and whatever she had told you could very well be lies.”

“—And you’re right...” Pete pressed his lips together. “—Because my dad also found out that Miss Scantling do not have a niece named Estelle Staceman. In fact, her only living relative is her seventy-year-old cousin in Pennsylvania.”

Jupiter could now clearly see how much the new information was bothering him.

“That... is not all,” Pete continued, “Lucyna Scantling is not in hospital. At the moment, she’s in New Mexico at the filming of her latest horror movie *The League of Zombies*... and guess what? ... She is in the best of health.”

“Oookay...” Jupiter felt another violent throbbing between his temples. “Everything they told us today is a lie.”

“So there we have it,” Bob said, “the Miss Scantling who spoke to Pete was telling a bunch of lies. She could very well be an impostor. As it is, we now cannot even be sure what is in the folder Pete retrieved from the safe... but we can safely assume that it contains something valuable.”

The First Investigator wiped his forehead and was silent for a few seconds. Then he took a deep breath. “I hereby declare that from now on we are our own clients. As it is, the only lead we have is the shared apartment, but it is no longer about Jayden... so there may be other clues lying around that is relevant to our cause.”

Suddenly, the First Investigator jumped up from his chair. “We’ll continue our discussions on the way there, fellas. Let’s go!”

### 13. Hot Soup

Barely two minutes later, Bob was steering his Beetle through the streets of Santa Monica in a south-easterly direction. He lowered the sun visor because of the glaring reflections from the bodies of the cars ahead.

"This is the third time I've tried, but Estelle just won't answer the phone," Pete realized nervously.

"I'm not at all surprised," Jupiter replied. "I can't get hold of Vincent either."

The Second Investigator sat in the back seat like a heap of misery. His glazed eyes were fixed on the footwell. "So if everything is a lie, including the story about the studio wanting to steal and destroy a script... then what valuable document could be in the folder?"

"We may not even know," Bob said. "When Silverstar discovers the missing folder, I believe they would want to cover up the whole thing at all costs, as it would not be good for their image."

"Oh no!" Pete suddenly cried out.

"What?" Jupe turned around and saw that Pete was pale as a sheet. "What now?"

"Terry Cillian!" Pete gasped.

"Terry who?" Jupe wondered.

"Terry Cillian—the security guard at Silverstar Pictures!"

"What about him?" Bob asked.

"He knows me, and when I passed his security booth, I spoke to him briefly... on two occasions—entry and exit," Pete explained. "All the while at Silverstar, I was wearing this darn cap! Even if the security cameras had not captured my face, they are sure to pick up on this cap... and Terry Cillian would be able to identify that it was me... under this cap. I'm in real hot soup now!"

"Okay," Jupe tried to calm down his friend. "They are likely to check the security footages only when they discover that something has gone amiss. In the meantime, we have to work extra hard to clear up this mess. I have no idea how long we will have, but we will keep pushing."

Bob resisted the sudden impulse to pull over to the side of the road to let what he had heard sink in. However, The Three Investigators had no time to lose if they wanted to get more clues from the shared apartment.

"So I did commit a theft after all..." Pete mumbled. He had just realized the full implications of what had happened. "Then I have to turn myself in to the police now to make it clear that I've been framed."

Jupiter shook his head. "Not just yet. As long as everything is still completely unclear, such an approach would be a strategic mistake because you couldn't possibly prove your innocence. Apart from your statement, there is not the slightest evidence that you acted on instructions. You would not be able to tell the police who the woman on the phone was or what you took from the safe. Moreover, you can't give any helpful information about the woman you gave the folder to, can you?"

Pete strained to visualize the face of Estelle. "No... she looked like probably a hundred thousand other women. I don't even know if her blonde hair was real or just a wig... and I

didn't remember the licence plate number of her car. I had no idea how it would all turn out."

"So no answers on all points—not good conditions for a police interrogation," Bob realized.

"Anything but that," Jupe agreed. Then he turned to Pete again. "If you were taken seriously at all, which I don't think is at all certain, you'd be completely dependent on the reaction and competence of the police in Santa Monica. In the worst case scenario, you'll end up with some over-zealous police officer who'll lock you up first. Then he takes a look at the security camera videos at Silverstar and declares you guilty. That's just the beginning."

Pete had to swallow involuntarily. He had seen various television documentaries about innocent people who had spent years, or even decades, in prison.

"Even if Inspector Cotta successfully intervenes on your behalf, nobody would have anything to gain from the whole mess," Jupiter continued. "The same applies if you were to try to clear up the incident at the movie studio. They probably wouldn't even finish talking to you, but would have you arrested immediately."

The First Investigator looked at Pete urgently. "It would be much more effective if we tried to recover the folder and get the real perpetrators convicted. That would be by far the best way to prove your innocence."

"You're probably... right," the Second Investigator admitted hesitantly. "I can really say almost nothing about the matter, except that the voice of the woman on the phone was weak and faint. I cannot be sure that it really was Lucyna Scantling..."

"I see." Jupiter mumbled. "We have to stick to our plan to resume our investigation starting from the shared apartment." He turned to Bob. "It's time to use our 'smokescreen tactic' again."

Bob nodded. "Flyers, I suppose?"

"Flyers, it is," Jupe confirmed.

"Under your seat..."

This time, the 'smokescreen tactic' was to be carried out using advertisement flyers. This was a preparatory measure in case someone turned up asking unpleasant questions at an inopportune moment, for example while eavesdropping or secretly opening a door. If this happened, the caught investigator could simply claim that he was there on behalf of the *Los Angeles Times* to distribute a flyer for a customer promotion. There would be one of numerous attractive bonuses when taking out an annual subscription, such as a limited edition designer radio alarm clock; a multi-function sandwich grill; or a portable foot spa with massage function. Each of The Three Investigators could now recite these details by heart.

As Bob's father worked as a journalist at the *LA Times*, Bob was always able to get advertising material at will. He had collected suitable flyers, coupons and stickers in a grey folder with the newspaper logo printed on it. Equipped with this smokescreen instrument, the boys had been able to talk their way out of many tricky situations.

Shortly afterwards, The Three Investigators reached their destination. To be on the safe side, Bob parked his car in a supermarket car park some distance from the apartment building.

"No motorbike, no Mitsubishi Mirage," Jupiter observed after a quick look around. "— But even if no one is in the apartment, we still have to check it out. As I was the only one who have been in there before, I'll do the checking... assisted by you, Pete."

Pete let out a low but audible grumble. "You probably mean assisted by my lock pick set for unauthorized entry."

Jupiter turned to him with a raised left eyebrow. “After the theft at the studio, this doesn’t really matter anymore, does it?”

However, he quickly backtracked in view of Pete’s bitter look. “Sorry, that wasn’t meant to be funny,” Jupe continued, “but you have to admit that it’s not without a certain irony that we’re now investigating a criminal offence for which we ourselves are responsible.”

Pete rolled his eyes and muttered: “Until this case is solved and I’m out of the woods, I honestly don’t have the stomach for irony.”

“That’s noted.” The First Investigator turned back to Bob. “While we’re checking the apartment, you could use the time to make some calls, perhaps to find out something about the folder.”

“I was wondering whether I should call Silverstar,” Bob said.

“That’s a bit tricky,” Jupe said, “because we do not know whether they are aware of the missing folder. If not, you do not want to be the one to trigger off an investigation. That would lead to them looking at the security footages and checking with the security guard.”

“—And then have the police put out an APB on me,” Pete added.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Bob said. “I’ll see what I can do.”

After Jupiter had taken the ‘smokescreen flyers’, he and Pete got out of the car.

The front door of the apartment building was wedged open by a black rubber stopper, presumably to allow at least a hint of a draught. However, this had no noticeable effect. Inside the building, it was just as hot and stuffy as on the first visit, and just as quiet, with the exception of a muffled football broadcast, the exact origin of which could not be determined.

The first thing Jupiter did was take a look at the letterboxes. “Well, that was to be expected.”

“Namely?” Pete asked.

“No more ‘V. Barraford & J. Cummings’. Instead, the nameplate now says ‘Glen Payson’—presumably the real occupant.” Jupiter pulled out his mobile phone and typed the name into a search engine. “He’s a plumber based here in Santa Monica. According to a customer rating scale, he’s actually a pretty good one.”

“—Who is either in cahoots with our ex-clients or knows nothing about any of this,” added the Second Investigator.

“Unless this is another false trail, I’m strongly leaning towards option two. This Mr Payson would be stupid to allow his apartment be used for unlawful activities that could easily be traced to his name afterwards.”

“That’s true.” Pete looked thoughtfully up the stairs. “That would mean that Payson is not at home at the moment and Vincent knew that... but how did he get this information?”

“I’ll quickly text Bob to do a check on this plumber, Glen Payson,” Jupe said.

“Meanwhile, we’ll go on up and check out his apartment...” Thirsty for action, the First Investigator strode forward.

The first floor was just as deserted as before. On the way to the end of the corridor, Jupiter inserted a flyer halfway through the bottom gap of each door they walked past. He had intentionally let the flyer be seen sticking out from under the door as part of the ‘smokescreen tactic’ to show that they were indeed distributing flyers.

When they reached the last door, the boys noticed that Glen Payson’s name was also on the doorbell.

First Jupiter knocked on the door, but even after a minute, nobody answered. Now he stood in front of Pete as a privacy screen. As quietly as possible, Pete opened the lock with his set of lock picks.

They both prepared themselves for a sudden confrontation in case they bumped into someone. However, there was no one in the apartment. Inside, Jupiter immediately noticed that a lot of things looked different from before.

Jupiter let his gaze wander. "All the things that pointed to the alleged Jayden have disappeared. Instead, I see different objects almost everywhere." He pointed to several framed photographs on the walls. They showed the same thirty-something black-haired and moustachioed man as that found on the plumber's website. In three of the photos, he could be seen arm in arm with a brunette woman of about the same age. "This is obviously Payson's original set-up, which was removed by Vincent and now quickly restored."

"—To cover all traces of the Jayden ploy," Pete added.

"Without a doubt," Jupiter said. "Also, the furniture here in the living room is definitely the same... and there is no green sofa..."

The two boys now entered the next room. "This is the room that was supposed to be Jayden's," Jupe said. "As I can see now, it is a guest bedroom. The single bed, wardrobe, and desk are all the same, except that the items—particularly the books—are no longer here."

The next room was Payson's master bedroom. "Now I just briefly looked in this room the first time round," Jupe said. "It was supposed to be Vincent's bedroom..." He paused and then sighed. "I should have spotted this earlier..."

"What?" Pete asked.

"There is a double bed in here," Jupe said. "I should have known that a student is unlikely to have a double bed in his room."

"So you are not as eagle-eyed as always," Pete remarked. "You're losing your touch, old boy!"

Jupiter ignored the comment. "Let's go search the rest of the apartment," he said.

However, the two boys found nothing that could help them. The removal of all suspicious clues had obviously been carried out with the utmost care.

"Quickly, thoroughly, efficiently." With a grim expression, Jupiter crossed his arms. "Whatever was in that safe, it must be so important or valuable that it justifies such an extraordinary effort."

"I agree," replied Pete, "but we're not going to find that here. Let's go before this Payson turns up."

The boys quietly stepped out into the corridor. Once again, the First Investigator acted as a screen as Pete locked the door. After all, they couldn't leave the apartment unlocked. Just as he had done earlier, Jupiter inserted a flyer halfway through the bottom gap of Payson's door.

At that moment, a door opened two apartments away and barely a second later, an indignant bass voice made the two investigators flinch:

"Hey, you two! What are you doing?"

## 14. A Plumber on His Honeymoon

“How daring can you get nowadays? Breaking into an apartment in the middle of the day?”

A stocky, mid-thirties man with a bald head, a fiery red beard and a green jogging suit stood at his doorway. His outstretched index finger pointed at Jupiter and Pete. With his other hand, he felt for something that was obviously next to him behind the door. The First Investigator guessed that the man was reaching for some sort of weapon. The crazy thing was that the boys had not been caught opening the door to Mr Payson’s apartment, but locking it.

Jupiter quickly raised the grey folder with the flyers and held it in front of him and Pete like a shield. “Please don’t do anything rash, sir—there’s been a misunderstanding. My friend and I were just bending over for this folder, which I dropped out of sheer clumsiness.”

“Folder?” The man, who was now holding a baseball bat, tilted his head in confusion.

Pete nodded eagerly. “Yes, we’re here on behalf of the *Los Angeles Times*.”

“Look, we’ve also put a flyer under your door.” Jupiter pointed to the piece of paper that the man was stepping on. “We’re here to distribute flyers for a subscription offer from our newspaper. With so many offers, there’s bound to be something for you.” He opened the folder and demonstratively took out several colourful slips of paper. “For example, the favourite with many subscribers is the Fruit Champion professional juicer with a high-quality stainless steel housing and automatic—”

“Give me a break! I’m not interested in fanciful gadgets like that.” The bearded man hesitated. He still didn’t seem to have overcome his mistrust. “—But why don’t you just chuck your flyers in the letterboxes downstairs?”

Jupiter knew he had to be convincing now. “Your question is perfectly understandable, sir. A survey by our newspaper showed that 68.5 per cent of people throw away advertising material from letterboxes without reading it. Flyers left outside front doors, on the other hand, reach a—”

“All right, all right, I get it.” The bearded man finally lowered the baseball bat. He seemed almost a little disappointed that he couldn’t give the boys a good thrashing. “I was just concerned because you were standing outside Glen’s apartment looking mighty suspicious. He’s travelling at the moment. You can take back your flyer as he won’t be back so soon.”

Jupe immediately sensed an opportunity for information. He quickly put on his most convincing smile. “You can’t put a price on neighbours looking out for each other.” He picked up the flyer at Mr Payson’s door. “We can come back again for him. Do you happen to know when he’ll be back?”

The man waved him off. “You can take your time. Glen is on his honeymoon across Europe with his wife and won’t be back until the end of the month.”

“I see.” Jupiter thought for a moment. “If you’ll allow me a second question—do students also live here? We have a very special offer for this target group.”

“Not that I know of,” the bald man replied. “Anyway, apart from two children, I’m the youngest person in the building.”

The First Investigator was not surprised with this reply. In fact, he had expected that it would be far too risky for the perpetrators to live in the same building where they had staged

the shared apartment.

“Thank you very much for your help.” Pete also tried to smile. In the meantime, he had inconspicuously sneaked his lock pick set back into his trouser pocket. “Then we’ll say goodbye now.”

“Whatever!” grumbled the bearded man when he finally bent down to pick up the flyer left at his door. “Don’t litter the place with your flyers. I don’t need newspapers. My wrestling magazine is enough for me.”

“Of course, sir,” replied the First Investigator with a sympathetic expression. “An excess of information can also be exhausting.”

Shortly afterwards, the boys were back in Bob’s Beetle, with the side windows rolled down to provide a little fresh air.

The First Investigator quickly briefed Bob on Glen Payson and his apartment.

“Okay,” Jupe said, “I think we can all agree that Mr Payson and his new wife are almost certainly not involved in this drama. Instead, their absence was obviously exploited by the perpetrators. I’m not in favour of contacting Mr Payson, For one thing, it would be very difficult to find out where he is now. Anyway, I very much doubt that he will be able to help us in this regard.”

“Not to mention that we’d be ruining his entire honeymoon if we called him now,” Pete added.

“Yes,” Jupe agreed, “but back to you, Bob—did you find out anything?”

Bob looked at the notes he jotted in his notebook. “I searched on the Internet for any reports of a stolen Hollywood script, but had not found anything. Then I checked the Internet postings of the two conmen in more detail.”

“So what did you find?” Pete asked.

“The profiles and comments of Vincent Barraford and Jayden Cummings are both written in the same linguistic style and with nearly identical wordings. This also applies to the occasional replies from alleged friends. On a cursory glance, you won’t notice it, but now it’s clear that it’s all a front. None of it is real... and get this—all the postings were made less than a week ago.”

“—Obviously with fake accounts to prevent being traced,” the First Investigator stated.

“Furthermore, as far as my research is concerned, neither Vincent Barraford nor Jayden Cummings is enrolled at Santa Monica College,” Bob continued. “There is also no known project partnership between the college and the State University of Medan in Sumatra, and there’s nothing at all on the Internet about an Estelle Staceman.”

“—As if all three never existed,” muttered Pete.

The First Investigator crossed his arms grimly. “No matter how clever our adversaries think they are, we will prove them wrong. We will solve this case and track down the mysterious folder.”

“—But we still don’t know how much time we have left to catch the culprits,” Pete said as he shifted his position in the back seat so that he could stretch out his legs. “What should we do next?”

The First Investigator looked over to the apartment building. “Even if Glen Payson isn’t involved, there must be some kind of connection between him and the perpetrators.”

“Right,” Bob agreed. “After all, they knew about Payson’s honeymoon and that nobody would be staying in his apartment while he is away.”



“Not only that—Vincent easily opened the door with a key,” Jupiter added. “Even if it was a copy key, Vincent must have got hold of the real one at some point to make the copy. So there must have been some contact in the past between Payson and either Vincent himself or one of the other people involved.”

“That makes sense,” replied the Second Investigator, “and one of the people involved must be an absolute Hollywood insider. After all, he or she knew all about the studio, the safe and the mysterious folder.”

“Okay...” Bob took over. “After Jupe texted me Glen Parson’s name, I did an initial background check on him, along with keywords such as ‘Hollywood’, ‘movie’ and ‘Silverstar’. It could have been that he was involved in some plumbing work on a movie set and that somehow became public. It’s not unusual for people to post something like that online.”

Jupiter furrowed his brow. “From your use of the subjunctive, I gather that you were unable to find any information in this regard.”

“You’re right,” Bob replied. “Of course, Payson might still have carried out such a job. After all, he points out on his website that his customer base is very large and wide-ranging.”

“I’m afraid that doesn’t help us at the moment,” Jupiter realized and pinched his lower lip thoughtfully. “Whoever the perpetrators are, they’ve taken great care not to leave anything behind that points to them or the connection to Mr Payson.”

The First Investigator glanced at his watch. “As far as further investigations are concerned, I suggest that we first—”

He didn’t get any further, because at that moment, the passenger door was wrenched open and someone violently dragged him out of the car.

## 15. A Surprising Confrontation

Jupiter was so taken by surprise that he was unable to react for the first few seconds. His eyes widened as he stared into the face of Vincent, who was now wearing gloves and a leather jacket.

No sooner had he dragged the First Investigator out of the car than the young man put his right arm around Jupe's shoulder in a seemingly friendly gesture, leading any witnesses to assume that this was a meeting between acquaintances.

Bob and Pete immediately jumped out of the car to come to Jupiter's aid, but the attacker quickly put his left hand into his jacket pocket, seemingly grasping a concealed weapon.

"Stay where you are, or you'll have to find a new buddy!" Vincent's gaze was as cold as ice.

That worked. Pete and Bob paused, unsettled. Whatever the man was hiding in his pocket, they couldn't risk him using it.

Now Jupiter regained his voice. "You won't get away with your plan. We now have enough evidence to—"

"Don't take me for a fool! You've got nothing!" Vincent tightened his grip on the First Investigator's shoulder. It felt like a vice. Jupiter hadn't thought him capable of such strength.

The next moment, Vincent leaned forward so far that his nose almost touched Jupiter's left cheek. In the following whisper, the man emphasized each syllable individually: "Let... it... be..."

Then he let go of Jupiter. He slowly took a step back and smiled broadly. It looked more like a snarl. "If you're clever, you'll never see me again. If not..." Instead of finishing the sentence, he pointed with his right hand to his left, which was still in the pocket of his leather jacket. Now the grin faded. "—And don't try to follow me. You're being watched."

Only now did Jupiter notice the skin-coloured bud earphone that Vincent was wearing in his ear. The First Investigator nodded.

The next moment, as if nothing had happened, the attacker retreated, strolled down the street and disappeared around a corner.

Pete, the most athletic and fastest of The Three Investigators, pointed ahead uncertainly. "Do you want me to follow him?"

Jupe shook his head. "At a certain point, the risk to life and limb takes precedence over a possible successful investigation... and that point has now been reached."

He let his gaze wander over the surrounding houses and especially the windows of the upper floors, but couldn't spot any observers. "As there seems to be a lot at stake for the perpetrators, it can't be ruled out that they would actually resort to armed violence."

Pete was relieved on hearing this sensible decision. At the same time, however, he also felt a deep-seated dissatisfaction that they had to give in to Vincent.

"That... doesn't mean we're giving up, does it?" Bob asked.

"No, it doesn't mean that at all," Jupiter replied, "especially as one thing is certain after the incident—our adversaries are getting nervous."

"—Because they now know that we're hot on their heels," added Pete, "but how and where should we continue now if all the previous leads go nowhere?"

Jupiter leaned thoughtfully against the side of Bob's Beetle. "It's true that almost everything in this case are lies and fakes. That's why we have to leave out everything that's been staged and concentrate on what remains as proven fact."

"There's only one thing I can think of as fact," Bob replied. "Pete took the folder from the safe and gave it to Estelle. That was definitely what happened."

"Exactly," Jupiter agreed. "It is this ominous and probably extremely valuable document from Silverstar Pictures that is the centre of everything."

Pete shrugged his shoulders. "Again it comes back to us not knowing what is in the folder."

"True," Jupiter agreed, "but we do know where it was kept—in a wall safe at Silverstar Pictures. That means that the document is linked to the studio, and that's why our primary goal now must be to find out what—"

At that moment, the First Investigator's mobile phone rang. When he recognized the number, he let out a soft sigh. Then he answered it: "Yes, Aunt Mathilda?"

"Are you still rescuing a damsel in distress?" Mrs Jones got straight to the point.

Jupiter hesitated. He didn't suspect anything good, but he didn't want to deceive his aunt either. "No... things have gone in a different direction."

"Good, then nothing stands in the way of your return. Titus is back and we urgently need you to unload the truck."

"This is... bad timing—"

"No, the timing's not bad," Mrs Jones interrupted sternly. "It would be bad if you didn't come back now to help us."

"I..." The First Investigator struggled with himself, but couldn't find a way out.

"Jupiter Jones," Aunt Mathilda began in a tone that left no doubt as to how serious she was. "I respect that you want to help people solve their problems, but you mustn't go so far as to lose sight of our own problems. Titus and I can't do this alone. We need you... and we need you now."

This argument was impossible to refute. "Okay, we're coming."

After the First Investigator ended the call, Bob pointed inside his car. "Back to the salvage yard?"

With the corners of his mouth hanging down, the First Investigator nodded. "Yeah... back to the salvage yard."

During the journey back, the boys discussed what to do next.

"This is all rather sudden, but sometimes you have to improvise," Jupiter explained, turning to Bob. "If two of us are enough to unload the truck, you should do some research into the movie studio's current projects."

"—Because that way we might find out what I really got out of the safe," the Second Investigator concluded.

"At least that's the most promising starting point at the moment," Jupiter confirmed. "If we're lucky, Bob will find a connection to Mr Payson or our two fake clients this way."

"Hmm..." Bob furrowed his brow. "If the folder really contained a script, then this script must have been a one-off with no copies, otherwise all the effort the perpetrators have put in would be completely pointless."

"A correct and important point," Jupiter agreed. "The value of this document must lie in its uniqueness as an original."

Bob continued: “Yes, if there are copies kept elsewhere, for example, back-up copies with the script writer, then there is no point stealing the copy in the studio—unless, of course, for whatever reason, you only want to deprive the studio of its only copy.”

Pete listened attentively. “Then... maybe there was a spark of truth behind the story about an eccentric Hollywood script writer... except that it might not be Lucyna Scantling.”

“—Perhaps someone else,” Jupiter added, addressing Bob again. “So you should include two separate aspects in your research—firstly, which movies are in the pipeline at Silverstar but not yet in production; secondly, are there any writers under contract with this studio who are known to have peculiarities when it comes to writing or submitting their scripts.”

“—Thirdly,” Bob continued, “if it’s not a script but something else in the folder, I’ll have to extend my antennae out in all directions. Maybe there’s just a treasure map... or the truth about the UFO landing in Roswell.”

Bob looked intently at the gradually thickening traffic. Experience had shown that many day trippers wanted to spend the summer evening on the beach. “Well, let’s hope your aunt will let me off the hard labour...”

This time the boys were lucky. Although there were many items in the truck, each was so small that it was easy to handle in terms of weight. It consisted of purchases that Uncle Titus had made at an auction following the closure of a bookshop in Pasadena.

There were numerous boxes and cartons full of novels, illustrated books, encyclopaedias, magazines, calendars and so on, but it was easy to sort them out. This was in contrast to the large load of furniture in the previous week, where it had been essential for everyone to work together to unload the heavy armchairs, sofas, tables and cupboards. Now, however, it was no problem for Uncle Titus, Pete and Jupiter to take on the much easier-to-handle boxes, while Bob retreated to The Three Investigators’ headquarters for his Silverstar research.

Headquarters was an old mobile home trailer camouflaged under a huge mountain of scrap metal in the grounds of the salvage yard. The main entrance to the trailer was what the boys called the ‘Cold Gate’. This was a huge unused refrigerator placed seemingly randomly among the same pile of scrap metal. The fridge was empty, but the back wall could be pushed aside using a hidden mechanism. Behind it was a short dark tunnel of corrugated sheet metal that led to the door of the trailer.

Over time, The Three Investigators had equipped the trailer with almost everything they needed for their investigations—computer and communication systems, electronic gadgets, audio-video devices, and even a small crime lab. In addition to refurbished furniture, and a refrigerator, the boys had installed many shelves, cupboards, and cabinets to store files and folders containing reports and documentation of their past cases.

It was in here and the adjacent outdoor workshop that the extremely tech-savvy First Investigator spent his time tinkering with gadgets—a favourite hobby of his. Among the latest devices he had repaired and assembled was a night-vision video camera to which a parabolic microphone was connected. This device made it possible to record clear video and audio from a distance.

Back at the yard, the books and magazines were not simply stowed away after unloading, but had to be carefully sorted into different genre and labelled with price tags—all done under the supervision of Jupiter’s aunt. The whole process took a good three hours. Afterwards, everyone enjoyed dinner together—hearty macaroni and cheese à la Mathilda Jones.

“So?” Jupiter whispered to Bob, who was sitting to his left, while Pete was talking to Mr and Mrs Jones. “How did your research go?”

“Laborious. A lot of the information is so-called ‘sensitive data’ that I can’t just get hold of. To find out some things, I had to make dozens of phone calls, including to people in the entertainment department of the *Los Angeles Times*, who are very well-connected to the movie industry. Anyway, I’m still far from finished... but I’ll tell you about that later.”

Bob had noticed that Aunt Mathilda was watching them suspiciously, presumably to find out whether the boys were in dangerous trouble again. He quickly put on a broad smile and pointed to his well-filled plate with his fork. “The macaroni is a dream as always, Mrs Jones. Your three-cheese sauce is simply unbeatable.”

“True words!” Pete agreed with a blissful expression before taking a bite.

Aunt Mathilda’s expression relaxed. “That makes me happy, boys.” She raised her right index finger in playful sternness and leaned forward. “—But don’t think you can use such flattery to get round your other task.”

“What other task?” Jupiter was at a loss for words for a moment.

Mrs Jones turned to her nephew. “I’ll just say one word, young man—‘trencher’.”

## 16. Knowing Catch Phrases is Handy

The Three Investigators were in a quandary. Jupiter had given Aunt Mathilda his word that he would repair the trencher, even working through the night if necessary, so he had to keep his promise.

He and Pete spent the next half hour looking for two important spare parts for a drive shaft and an auger conveyor. Only then could they continue with the repair of the trencher. In the meantime, Bob continued his elaborate research at Headquarters.

Just under an hour later, the repair work was gradually approaching the home straight. The sun had long since set. Apart from the distant glimmer of the street lights beyond the high fence, the salvage yard was now in darkness. Only the bare light bulb in the outdoor workshop was still on—and of course the light in the trailer, which, however, did not penetrate to the outside because of the camouflage of junk.

With a furrowed brow, Jupiter looked at a flap that wasn't quite flush. "I'll have to repair that, otherwise it will continue to deform over time... provided we don't have any—"

He didn't get any further because he heard the Cold Gate open, and then came Bob's voice: "Hey! Are you still there?"

"Yes, Bob," Jupe replied. "Have you found something?"

"Nothing concrete, but I might as well tell you what I have," Bob said. "Come back into Headquarters."

It was about time Jupiter and Pete took a break from the repair work, so they scurried into the trailer.

"Okay, let's have a look then." Bob took out his notebook and flicked to the relevant place. "According to reliable sources, there are currently nine scripts in various stages of development at Silverstar Pictures. The genres range from romantic comedy to thriller."

"—And the titles?" asked Pete.

"In five cases, the project titles have already been finalized internally; in the other four, they haven't yet." Bob turned to another page. "I'll start with the titles we already know: *Commando Sea Tiger*—an action movie; *The Last Diplomat*—thriller; *Winter Worlds Episode III*—fantasy; *The Jewels of the Singer*—"

"Mission completed successfully!" shouted Pete suddenly.

Jupiter looked at him, perplexed. "Would you be so kind as to tell us what you mean by that?"

The Second Investigator raised his hands excitedly. "Estelle said that in the background on the phone. She specifically said: 'Mission completed successfully', followed by 'your—' before being cut off by Vincent at that point! The complete phrase is: 'Mission completed successfully, Your Lordship'."

Jupiter understood. "Yet another catch phrase from a movie..."

"Not just any movie..." Pete continued. "'It's one of the three standard catch phrases of Gartalon, the general of the forces of Lord Dravion, ruler of the Arctic Empire—in the fantasy saga... *Winter Worlds*!'"

"Are you sure about that?" Bob asked.

“Sheesh! Of course, I’m sure,” Pete asserted. “Weren’t you annoyed with me repeating such catch phrases all the time?”

“Excellent, Pete!” praised Jupiter. “I can only deduce that Estelle is just as big a fan of that saga as you.” Then he turned to Bob. “Who’s the script writer for *Winter Worlds*?”

“She is Odette Carrington—73 years old, living in Beverly Hills.”

Jupiter typed the name of the script writer and the keyword ‘student’ into the computer keyboard. After clicking and browsing through the top few search results, he found what he was looking for.

“Aha!” the First Investigator exclaimed. “Six months ago, Hollywood author Odette Carrington was a guest lecturer in fiction writing at Los Angeles City College... and here’s a photo taken at the lecture theatre... Guess who’s sitting in the front row with their faces transfixed?”

His friends quickly moved closer to take a look at the screen.

“It’s Vincent and Estelle, side by side!” Pete exclaimed. He blinked in disbelief and leaned back in his chair. “So the folder could very well contain the script for the finale of the legendary *Winter Worlds* trilogy!”

“We haven’t got that far yet,” Jupiter replied, “but the possibility must be considered.”

“Wait a minute!” Bob pushed the First Investigator aside on his swivel chair and typed a few terms into the search engine himself.

Perplexed, Jupiter raised his shoulders.

“It’s getting more interesting by the minute,” Pete remarked.

Moments later, Bob began to beam. “I remembered it right!” He pointed to an article in the *Los Angeles Times* dated 13th May.

“*Flooding at Celebrity Mansion*,” Jupiter read out. “A burst pipe ruins the entire basement of the home of *Winter Worlds* author Odette Carrington...”

Bob nodded with a smile. “The keywords ‘Winter Worlds’ and ‘Carrington’ made me think of this article which was edited by none other than my dad when he was covering duties at the entertainment department. Of course at that time, it wouldn’t have been important to take notice of the van parked in front of the mansion—the one you can now see in the photo below.”

Pete leaned forward to read the red lettering across the side of the van—‘Payson & Partners’.

“Oh, wow...” Jupiter muttered, while Bob was already searching the Internet for more information about Odette Carrington.

“Fellas,” the First Investigator continued after a short pause. “We can now establish a direct link between Glen Payson, Odette Carrington, and our two bogus clients!”

“The only question is how exactly the four of them are connected,” added Bob. “With Mr Payson, we’re pretty sure he doesn’t know anything about the whole thing, otherwise he’d voluntarily put himself and his newly-wed wife on a platter.”

Jupiter nodded. “Glen Payson is almost certainly not one of the perpetrators, but his apartment was used to enable the diversionary ploy for the script theft. What remains unanswered, however, is the question of whether Odette Carrington is the victim of the two students who wanted to get hold of her script, or whether she herself is pulling the strings in the background.”

The Second Investigator played thoughtfully with a pencil sharpener. “If this Odette is involved—why would she want me to secretly take her own script out of the safe? There can’t be any danger to the project, unlike Estelle’s story about ‘Golden Galaxy’. After all, the

*Winter Worlds* movies are huge successes, so nobody at Silverstar would want anything to go wrong with *Episode III*.”

“—Unless one of the oldest crime motives is behind it,” Jupe suggested. “—The greed for money.”

“You mean extortion?” asked Bob.

“At the very least, this script would be an immensely lucrative bargaining chip, assuming it really is the only copy,” Jupe surmised. “What else do you know about Mrs Carrington?”

Bob shook his head. “The woman has managed to stay largely under the public radar for all these decades. There were hardly any reports or photos of her. One of the few exceptions is this group photo at the Golden Globe Awards three years ago.” He called up the photo that he had bookmarked on the browser.

Jupiter pinched his lower lip, pondering. “I don’t know about you, but her face rings a bell... and it has nothing to do with *Winter Worlds* or the movie industry. There’s something else...”

“You mean you’ve seen her somewhere before?” Pete wondered aloud.

“If it had been a direct encounter, I would remember it.” Frowning, Jupiter folded his arms behind his head. “No, it was something indirect—maybe even in connection with one of our previous cases.”

“Freeman!” Bob suddenly shouted, turning from the computer to the filing cabinet and hastily pulling out an old brown document file.

“Freeman?” Pete echoed, confused.

“She only took the name Carrington after her marriage,” Bob continued as he eagerly leafed through the file. “She was divorced shortly afterwards, but she kept the new surname. Before that, she was known as Odette Freeman. I didn’t think anything more of it during my research, but after Jupe’s tip, I’m pretty sure that—”

“—Odette is the sister of Professor Freeman—the perpetrator we exposed in *The Mystery of the Whispering Mummy*,” Jupiter finished the sentence.

With a triumphant smile, Bob placed the file on the desk and pointed to a cut-out newspaper article from *Rocky Beach Today*. “She stood up for her brother with fervour and caused a commotion in court by insulting the judge and jury after the guilty verdict.”

“Obviously she wouldn’t have forgotten who to thank for her brother’s conviction,” Pete added.

A broad smile now flitted across the First Investigator’s face. “—Which obviously brings out yet another one of the oldest crime motives—revenge.”

“That would also explain the unusual amount of effort that went into the Sumatra show,” Bob noted. “Mrs Carrington wanted to mislead us from start to finish with her supposed brilliance. I’m sure she was certainly amused by our diligent investigations into her diversion.”

“—Until we found the tell-tale signs,” Pete replied. “She’s certainly not enjoying herself now, otherwise Vincent wouldn’t have reappeared to threaten us.”

“Indeed,” Jupiter agreed. “So let’s assume that our main antagonist is Odette Carrington. She used us, and Pete in particular, through two accomplices to steal her own script from the studio safe.”

“Then wouldn’t now be the time to inform the police?” Pete asked hopefully.

“No, it’s too early for that. After all, we can’t give the police any valid evidence of Mrs Carrington’s involvement. We still have to obtain that—with certain precautionary measures.” He turned to Bob. “Do you have an address or a telephone number for Mrs Carrington?”



Bob put the archive folder back and began to leaf through his notebook, sighing softly.

“Is something wrong?” Jupiter enquired.

“No, everything’s okay. I’m just a bit annoyed that I’ve spent hours gathering information on a thousand other movie people, all of which is probably useless now.”

“You never know,” Jupiter disagreed. “An investigator should never complain about having too much information. If you hadn’t kept that newspaper cutting of the courtroom antics of Odette Freeman, it would have hampered our investigation now.”

“True...” Bob handed him the open notebook. “Here are her contact details.”

“Are you going to call Mrs Carrington just like that?” Pete asked, surprised.

Jupiter pointed at the phone. “Not me... but you.”

“Me?” The Second Investigator’s eyes widened. “Why me of all people?”

“Because she chose you to carry out her plan. She specifically spied on you and your freedom of movement on the studio premises, and she clearly knew that you and your dad would get into hot soup if you were identified on the security camera recordings.” Jupiter smiled broadly. “So it’s only appropriate that you confront her now.”

Pete still wasn’t sure what to make of this approach. “—And you think if I call Mrs Carrington now, she’ll just tell me what’s really behind the whole ploy?”

“Hardly just like that, but we have an ace up our sleeves that the lady doesn’t know about —our knowledge that she is the mastermind, and that’s exactly what we’ll use to draw her out.”

Bob scratched his chin. “—But we’ve just discussed the fact that we don’t yet have enough evidence against Mrs Carrington to get her convicted.”

“Absolutely true,” Jupiter affirmed. “That’s why Pete will be using a different strategy for his phone call.”

“Namely?” the Second Investigator asked.

The answer that followed left him speechless for a moment:

“You’re going to blackmail her.”

## 17. Showdown With the Mastermind

“Blackmail?” Pete blinked in confusion. “With what?”

“I’ll get to that now,” Jupiter replied. “It won’t do any good to accuse Mrs Carrington of what she did. She’d probably just deny it and threaten us with legal action for defamation.”

“I agree,” Bob said.

“Let’s look at the basic nature of the offence,” the First Investigator continued. “Despite the urge for revenge, Odette Carrington’s master plan was designed from start to finish to minimize all risks. The entire Sumatra show and the retrieval of the script of the made-up ‘Golden Galaxy’ were to dissolve into a blissfully harmless nothingness.”

Pete nodded. “Everything that could jeopardize her success has been carefully erased—names, traces, clues.”

“Exactly,” Jupiter affirmed. “So I assume that Mrs Carrington will be very open-minded if we make her an offer in return for not disclosing her ploy.”

“—Say, for a share of the pie?” Bob wondered.

“Yes. I believe that Mrs Carrington will prefer this lesser evil to the risk of us investigating further and obtaining airtight evidence that will lead to her conviction.” Jupiter stroked his forehead. “The trick must be to remain as vague and at the same time as direct as possible so that she doesn’t even think of asking more questions.”

“—And what does that mean?” Pete shrugged his shoulders.

“Succinct statements that leave no room for manoeuvre. She has to understand right from the start that we know it was her. We know it’s about *Winter Worlds*, and we want a share of her takings.” Jupiter grinned grimly. “I’ll bet you the next three lunches that Mrs Carrington will agree to a meeting very soon.”

Bob smiled wryly. “With a bet like that, you must be really sure of yourself... but what if this meeting makes things uncomfortable for us?”

“I think that’s highly unlikely. Although we don’t yet know what Odette Carrington’s exact goal is, it is clear that it must be of a high financial value. So if she can somehow prevent her grand scheme from failing, she is guaranteed to take the path of least resistance. After all, she wants to avoid public fuss at all costs.”

The Second Investigator took a deep breath. “Okay, let’s scare the lady a little then...”

Pete switched on the loudspeaker attached to the telephone for his friends to hear the conversation. Then he dialled the number Bob had found.

However, it wasn’t a woman who answered at the other end, but an obviously elderly man: “Mrs Carrington’s residence. How may I help you?”

“This is Pete Crenshaw. Could I speak to Mrs Carrington?”

“No, Mrs Carrington has been admitted to St Joseph’s Sanatorium in Westwood for a few days due to a serious nervous condition.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.” The Second Investigator hadn’t expected that. His friends also raised their eyebrows. “Is there a number where I can reach her? It’s about a very important matter.”

The man readily gave a telephone number, which Bob immediately noted down.

“Thank you very much,” Pete replied. “May I ask whom I’m speaking to?”

“Hillman. I’m the butler.”

“You’ve helped me a lot, thank you very much again.”

After hanging up, Pete scratched his ear thoughtfully. “A nervous condition—that’s exactly what Estelle said about Lucyna Scantling... which we now know is just a bunch of lies! Now I’m willing to bet that the script writing peculiarity Estelle described was not about Lucyna Scantling, but Odette Carrington!”

“If that is true, then the folder contains the only copy of the script for *Episode III*,” Bob said, “and now it is no longer at Silverstar Pictures, but back in the hands of Mrs Carrington.”

“Yes,” Jupe agreed, “and as earlier suggested, extortion could very well be behind this.”

“Coming back to my conversation with the butler,” Pete wondered, “isn’t it rather odd that he would just give out such private information as to where Mrs Carrington is?”

“Not at all—it fits the picture perfectly,” Jupiter replied. “The fact that this Hillman is giving out such sensitive information over the phone can only mean that he’s been instructed to do just that. Anyone who enquires about Mrs Carrington today, especially the movie studio should know that she has been in hospital for some time.”

“—And therefore couldn’t possibly have been the person breaking into the safe,” added Bob. “It’s an absolutely airtight alibi because the hospital staff can testify that she was in the sanatorium all day.”

“That’s right.” Smiling, Jupiter picked up the phone and handed it to Pete. “It’s high time we enquired about the patient’s condition.”

Despite the late hour, Odette Carrington answered after just one ring. “Cornelius, is that you?”

“Sorry to disappoint you, Mrs Carrington, but I am Pete Crenshaw of The Three Investigators,” replied the Second Investigator in a firm voice. “—And I’d like to talk to you about the value of the document in the folder you now have.”

There was a pause. Only soft breathing could be heard.

“Mrs Carrington, are you still on the line?”

A hoarse clearing of the throat followed. The author seemed to be sorting out her thoughts. This obviously worked quite well, because the following sentences sounded confident and serene, as if the woman had expected such a situation to occur. That included the fact that if the call was traced, it could be established that the call had been taken from her hospital room.

“No doubt you mean the document of my... private research project. I may not be feeling well at the moment, but I should always have an open ear for interested parties. Why don’t we meet up for a chat now?”

Stunned by this callousness, Pete looked over at Jupiter. The First Investigator nodded.

“Agreed,” Pete said, “but can we get onto the grounds of the sanatorium at this time of the night?”

“No problem,” replied Mrs Carrington. “I enjoy certain privileges and can receive visitors outside of regular hours. Shall we say in thirty minutes?”

Pete was given the address of the sanatorium and the exact meeting place. Bob used the Internet to do a quick check on the layout of the place, while Jupe and Pete gathered some equipment for the mission. Soon, they set off in Bob’s Beetle towards Westwood.

On the journey there, they discussed what to do when they met their celebrity adversary. They expected that Mrs Carrington would be well-prepared, so they didn’t want to be any less prepared.

When they arrived at their destination, the investigators split up. While Pete and Jupiter entered the spacious grounds of the hospital, Bob remained in an observation position outside the fence hiding behind an oleander hedge.

The garden of St Joseph's was more like an elongated park. If first-time visitors had had to rely solely on the pale moonlight, they would have had difficulty finding their way around. Thankfully, there were a dozen or so elegant white lamps forming islands of light at regular intervals on the paved path.

About thirty metres away, the Victorian-style sanatorium rose up into the dark night sky. There were various seating areas dotted around round tables throughout the grounds, but only one of them, the furthest away from the lamp light, was occupied.

Surrounded by large bushes swaying in a light breeze, a slender, almost scrawny figure could be seen in the gloomy semi-darkness, apparently staring directly at the boys.

"That must be her!" Pete murmured. A queasy feeling spread through his stomach. "Oh man, I feel like I'm in a scary movie."

Instead of contradicting his sometimes anxious friend, the First Investigator nodded. "That sums it up perfectly. As with her Sumatra show, the lady seems to be aiming for a perfect production—a Hollywood script writer through and through."

Pete tightened up. "Well, let's hope there's a happy ending for us..."

The two slowly approached. By now they could see that the silver-haired woman was indeed Odette Carrington. Unlike in the Golden Globe photo, she had her hair tied in a tight bun.

After they had sat down, Jupiter first adjusted his chair. Then, to their surprise, the boys were greeted with the words: "I'm pleased to see you. I always feel at home among animal lovers."

At the same time, the woman switched on a small flashlight and pointed the beam of light at a piece of paper lying on the table in front of her. There were just two words written on it in bold handwriting—'Mobile Phones'.

After a moment's hesitation, and with petrified faces, Jupiter and Pete obediently took out their mobile phones and placed them on the table. True enough, as Mrs Carrington had prepared for, both mobile phones had the voice recording function running.

Without saying a word, the woman maintained a watchful gaze at the two boys. However, they knew what was required of them—they switched off their phones and placed them back on the table with the screens facing up.

Jupiter had to admire the precautions Mrs Carrington took. In fact, it would have been possible for him and Pete to have been wearing other bugging devices covertly... but that was not the case.

"Weren't there three of you coming for this discussion about my zoology project?" the woman asked in a friendly, chatty tone.

"Our friend Bob is unfortunately unable to come," the First Investigator replied, "but I'm sure we'll still have a productive... discussion."

"Okay," the lady said. "Let me check whether my phone is on silent mode..." She took out her mobile phone, looked and tapped on it briefly before putting it away.

"Well then, let's begin..." The woman narrowed her eyes. "In our earlier conversation, you mentioned that you were particularly interested in the entomology aspect of my work."

"Uh, yeah..." replied Pete, who had no idea where this was going.

The First Investigator nodded. "Entomology has always been our great passion."

"More than understandable," Mrs Carrington smiled, but without any warmth or cordiality.

Despite the boys' phones being switched off, she didn't seem to want to take any risks and wasn't about to say anything yet on the real purpose of the discussion. Pete kept quiet and Jupiter decided that it was best to play along and see what the woman was up to.

"It's an incredibly exciting subject area, especially ants," Mrs Carrington continued. "The individual insect is pretty useless. Their worth comes from the sheer number of them in a colony."

"Unity is strength," Jupiter remarked. "The larger the number, the greater the success."

"That's right." The woman's smile widened. "Insect enthusiasts like yourselves will be interested to know that in a colony of pharaoh ants, the number of individual insects can be as high as 300,000!" As she said this number, she turned the sheet of paper over to reveal a large dollar sign emblazoned on the back.

Jupiter had to blink involuntarily and Pete suddenly had a big lump in his throat. Over the years, although not frequent, there had been attempts to bribe The Three Investigators, but \$300,000 was far beyond anything they had ever been offered before. So for Odette Carrington, an incredibly large sum of money must indeed be at stake.

The conversation so far was clearly heard by Bob, who was using Jupiter's night-vision video camera and parabolic microphone to record the audio and video from a distance away at the fence.

Mrs Carrington was clearly identifiable. Now Jupiter and Pete just had to try to elicit a slip of the tongue from her that would prove the *Winter Worlds* ploy beyond doubt. Due to the author cleverly avoiding any mention of the folder or script, the recorded material so far was not yet sufficient to have her convicted.

"However clever you are, we'll catch you anyway," Bob grimly whispered to himself.

"I doubt it," a voice suddenly sounded directly behind him. "Switch off the camera and turn around slowly."

Out of necessity, Bob followed the instruction. There stood Vincent, with his left hand again in the pocket of his leather jacket. Beside him was Estelle. Both had a wicked grin on their faces.

## 18. “Mission Completed Successfully...”

“Oh, how nice! Cornelius and Milanda have managed to get your friend to join us after all,” Mrs Carrington said happily as Bob, flanked by the two students, approached the table. The young man carried the night-vision video camera and parabolic microphone with both hands—like a trophy.

So now The Three Investigators knew the real names of their adversaries. Unfortunately, this was of no use to them in the current situation.

“He probably didn’t want to miss out on this... uh... pleasure,” Jupiter replied haltingly. Pete lowered his head and bit his lower lip.

After a silent signal from the author, the investigators were now thoroughly patted down all over their bodies. All their pockets were emptied, and the contents placed on the table. The boys even had to roll up their T-shirts and take off their shoes.

When it was clear that there were no other bugging devices concealed on the boys, they were asked to sit down at the table.

Odette Carrington slowly leaned back and crossed her legs. Everything about her expression radiated a deep sense of satisfaction at having gained total control of the situation. She was like a queen of ice, with pride and smugness, and a chilling coldness in her eyes.

“Okay, guys... You wanted to get me—that’s your job; I foiled your attempt—that’s my job. Now it’s time to bring the matter to a satisfactory conclusion for all concerned.”

Pete hissed angrily. “I’ll certainly never be satisfied that you took advantage of me in such a devious way with the help of your two lackeys.”

Bob nodded. “Besides, The Three Investigators have never given in to injustice.”

Mrs Carrington remained outwardly and completely unimpressed. “Everything in the world has its price, even personal dignity or your code of honour as investigators.” She tapped the piece of paper with the dollar sign. “You’ll never get another offer like this that can provide your lives and those of your families with a comfortable future.” She paused for a moment, then leaned forward towards the boys. Her gaze now had a lurking, predatory feel. “However, with the same financial outlay, I could ensure that your lives and those of your families are ruined from the ground up...”

Jupiter took a deep breath. “Those are impressive points you’ve brought up...” He paused for a few seconds before turning to look at Pete and Bob with an expression that reflected seriousness and consternation.

Then the First Investigator turned his gaze back to Mrs Carrington. “If we’re going to go along with your deal, we’d at least like to know what you’re buying our silence for. Why did you get Pete to retrieve the folder?”

The author made an amused sound. “In this hour of mutual understanding and...” she looked at the camera in Cornelius’s hand, “—complete candour, I see no reason to deny you this request.”

Bob made a gesture of encouragement. “We’re listening.”

“As you know, movie audiences worldwide have been eagerly awaiting the grand finale of the *Winter Worlds* trilogy. This will undoubtedly rake in huge earnings for the studio.”

“That sounds great,” said Pete cheekily. “So what’s the problem?”

Mrs Carrington twisted the corners of her mouth. “The problem is that nine years ago, nobody could have known what an incredible success these movies would be—least of all, me. Silverstar Pictures was still a relatively small company back then and they were looking for a script writer who would be willing to work cheaply to come up with a multi-part fantasy movie.”

“—And you signed a contract that turned out to be unfavourable for you in retrospect,” Jupiter concluded.

“Unfavourable?” the woman hissed contemptuously. “‘Outrageous’ is a much accurate word! It was an all-inclusive contract for all three episodes. Looking back, the pay was ridiculous, but at that time, I was in a career slump with no jobs far and wide.”

“That shouldn’t be!” Cornelius raged. “All your movies were absolute masterpieces!”

Milanda nodded vigorously. Her eyes literally lit up. “It’s beyond understanding how a genius like you could go unrecognized for so long!”

The Second Investigator let out a low groan in the face of this unrestrained apple-polishing. The two students looked like cult followers who had fallen head over heels for their idol. They were like trained lapdogs who were prepared to do literally anything to please their owner. That was what made them dangerous.

Smiling mildly, Mrs Carrington raised her right hand. “It’s all right, sweeties. I’m having a conversation here.”

The two of them pressed their lips together and took a step back behind the author’s chair. This submissiveness seemed both silly and frightening at the same time.

Jupiter tried not to be distracted by the bizarre spectacle. “I suppose I am right in assuming that no further negotiations were possible later?”

The woman’s expression darkened. “Not a chance. All the contract clauses were airtight. If I breached my obligation to complete all three episodes for the agreed fee, the studio would sue me to the ground... So I gave in.”

“—At least for the time being,” Bob added, “but now, with the unbelievably hyped third episode, you’ve had enough.”

“Quite right!” Cornelius exclaimed, but was immediately silenced by another hand gesture from the author.

“—And that’s why you came up with the plan to retrieve the script from the safe,” Pete concluded.

“To extort money from your studio, presumably for a sum in the millions,” added the First Investigator. “—Anonymously, of course, because you had a perfect alibi here at the sanatorium after your alleged nervous breakdown.”

“Not just an alibi,” corrected Mrs Carrington, “but also a credible explanation as to why, in this deplorable state, I would be physically and mentally incapable of producing a new version of the script within a short space of time. The studio is already way behind schedule, thanks to some delays on my part. The release date for the movie has long since been set and the production pressure is increasing daily. There is also no substitute writer because no other writer knows the content of my third script in order to bring together the countless common threads from the first two episodes.”

“So if Silverstar doesn’t want to risk losing the legendary *Winter Worlds* goldmine, the studio will have to give in to the extortion,” Bob said, “especially since the projected worldwide earnings from this trilogy finale will surely be many times higher than your demanded sum.”

“Silverstar will want to avoid a huge scandal surrounding the disappearance of one of Hollywood’s most coveted scripts,” Pete said and his eyes darkened. “—And I was the ideal

errand boy—in the thick of the action.”

Mrs Carrington nodded. “Bribing a studio employee was out of the question because I couldn’t risk the person informing the studio. A paid thief from outside was also not ideal because he wouldn’t have been able to get inside the secure premises.”

Pete snorted angrily. “—Unlike me...”

“That’s right. I’ve been keeping an eye on you and your friends for a long time. That’s why I knew about your acquaintance with the unstable Miss Scantling. She was an ideal decoy.”

Jupiter tapped his chin thoughtfully. “Your entire plan presupposes the uniqueness of the script. We have already figured out that the made-up idiosyncrasy story about Lucyna Scantling was really about you—in that you work with a single typewritten copy until your script is finalized.”

“Clever boy. That’s always been my policy, and Silverstar accepted that as long as I worked on the script exclusively on the secure studio premises and locked it in the safe during writing breaks.”

“That became the basis for your plan with Pete,” Bob added. “Jupe and I were supposed to be as far away and as busy as possible so that we couldn’t interfere with him taking on the task.”

“The fewer the risks, the greater the chance of success,” replied the author stoically.

The First Investigator crossed his arms. “—But a simple distraction wasn’t enough for you. You staged a sophisticated Sumatra show so that you could enjoy watching us struggle to no purpose.” He narrowed his eyes. “Is this retribution for our role in your brother’s conviction?”

“For the rest of my life, I’ll be enjoying the video footages my assistants secretly made of you with button cameras.” Mrs Carrington smiled with amusement.

“All respect!” The First Investigator remarked and clapped his hands sarcastically. “In addition to your astonishing level of criminal energy, you are also a very opportunistic person. I also applaud you for improvisation, like when Mr Payson attended to the plumbing problem in your house in May, you came up with the idea of using his residence as the setting for your shared apartment scenario.”

The author chuckled. “It was child’s play to eavesdrop on that guy—he talked like a waterfall. That’s how I found out about his apartment and his planned long honeymoon. I was then able to make impressions of his keys without any problems, because he had to go into the waist-high water in the basement several times and had therefore put the contents of his pockets aside beforehand.”

“How convenient...” Pete murmured.

“Renting an apartment was out of the question as it could be traced to one of you,” Jupiter surmised. “The staging you chose only left a false trail to a plumber in Santa Monica.”

“—And what’s the Eagle Lady all about?” asked Bob.

“Eagle Lady?” Mrs Carrington remarked in surprise.

“Uh... I mean the tall Indonesian lady,” Bob clarified.

“Oh, she and the person you know as ‘Jayden’ are friends of Cornelius and Milanda. We paid them—and I must say, very well—to act out their roles... but they have no idea of the grand scheme of things.”

“So the whole set-up was completely fabricated,” Bob surmised.

“Not completely,” Mrs Carrington countered. “The Sumatra story was... well, as you put it—fabricated. However, to make it easier for the actors to play their roles, a large part of the ‘Jayden’ character was based on this friend of Cornelius.”



“—Who is a fan of the Cleveland Guardians...” Pete mumbled.

“Giving you that cap was not intentional,” Milanda explained, “just a little slip-up on our part.”

“Not to worry, Milanda,” Mrs Carrington said. “Things worked out fine in the end.”

Then Mrs Carrington grinned broadly at The Three Investigators. “You three acted as pieces on my chessboard exactly according to plan—exactly according to the script for retrieving my script.”

“Not quite,” Bob disagreed, “otherwise we wouldn’t be here.”

“Actually, I did factor in this possibility,” the author replied impassively.

Jupiter nodded. “You suggested this unusual late night meeting not least because during the day, there would be far too many witnesses—such as patients and hospital staff.”

“I pull the strings regardless of the time,” Mrs Carrington confirmed, “and you will undoubtedly follow my plan to the letter.”

“—Because you have been superior to us in every respect,” Pete added with a sarcastic undertone.

“There’s no longer any doubt about that,” Mrs Carrington replied smugly. “I triumphed over The Three Investigators and finally showed these supposed super investigators their limits. At all times, I was way ahead of you—”

At that moment, she was interrupted by Milanda, who was standing behind her and suddenly looked very pale.

“Their pocket contents...” she began and then faltered.

Confused, the author turned round. “What are you babbling about?”

The young woman pointed to the several items lying on the table top. “There are just two mobile phones... not three.”

Mrs Carrington froze. Earlier, she had watched closely when Jupiter and Pete took their phones out and switched them off, but when all three boys emptied their pockets later, she had only looked to see if they had any bugging devices with them.

Startled, the author leaned forward towards Bob. Her complacency had fizzled out like a burst soap bubble. Now she had hecticness and anger written all over her face. “Where’s your mobile phone?”

“Oops!” Smiling, Jupiter paused for effect.

Then he reached down to the grass and picked up a mobile phone that he had secretly placed there next to his foot. “I must have pocketed my esteemed colleague’s mobile phone before we arrived and then dropped it when Pete and I first sat down...” He pointed to the display. “—With an active connection to the Rocky Beach police.”

“That... can’t be...” Mrs Carrington’s eyelids fluttered. Her two accomplices were also visibly shaken.

Pete was beaming. “Well, for every master plan, there’s a counter-plan.”

While Milanda froze, Cornelius suddenly flinched.

“You rascals!” Enraged, Cornelius reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a box cutter, but before he could extend the blade, the Second Investigator had the presence of mind to lunge at him, grab him by the arm, and wrestle him to the ground. Bob quickly snatched the dangerous weapon from the wildly swearing student.

The First Investigator raised his eyebrows in mock disappointment. “I would have expected a real *Winter Worlds* warrior to draw out an ice sword from the Arctic Empire... but I must remind myself not to get too caught up with those fantasy movies.”

“It’s an appropriate conclusion for our case,” Bob added with a grin. Then he turned back to Mrs Carrington, who was now pale as a sheet. “Of course, we had anticipated that you

would set a trap for us. That's why I gave Jupe my mobile phone earlier. Then out there by the fence, I fiddled around as conspicuously as possible with the night-vision video camera. As expected, I was promptly captured by your 'sweeties'—as you call them."

Pete nodded. "After getting our night-vision camera, you were so focused on looking for more bugging devices on us that you overlooked an inconspicuous missing mobile phone."

"It's a distraction tactic—as you may be very familiar with," Jupiter added.

Odette Carrington's ice armour had finally cracked. There was no more pride, no more arrogance, as she just sat there dumbstruck.

"You've considered just about everything," Pete continued, "but not that Jupe might have two mobile phones with him."

"Speaking of mobile phones..." Bob took back his mobile phone from Jupiter, and spoke loudly on it: "Was the connection good, Inspector?"

"Crystal clear reception," a distinctive voice now sounded from both the speakerphone and the background a short distance away.

Flanked by friendly colleagues from the Los Angeles Police Department, Inspector Cotta approached the table. "An incredibly exciting story that will undoubtedly interest the magistrate."

Both Mrs Carrington and the two students were arrested without resistance.

Just before they were taken away, a much-relieved Pete couldn't resist putting in a final word as he turned to Mrs Carrington and said: "For The Three Investigators, it's 'mission completed successfully, Your Ladyship'"—much to the annoyance of the three detainees.

"How ironic," Jupe remarked, smiling. "It all started with a fake mobile phone call from Sumatra and this case ends with a real mobile phone call to the police."

Cotta approached the boys. For once, he didn't seem grumpy or annoyed. "Good work, boys. We'll expect you at the police department tomorrow morning for the usual formalities."

"All right, sir." Jupiter let out a loud yawn. "—But now I need a good night's sleep."

"That'll have to wait a while," said Bob.

Jupiter looked at him in astonishment. "Why is that? The case is concluded."

With a wry smile, Bob let out a sigh. "That may be so for *The Mystery of the Movie Script Ploy*, but we still have to attend to 'The Mystery of the Trencher Repairs'..."

"—Else we would be banished to the outer limits of the final frontier!" Pete added.